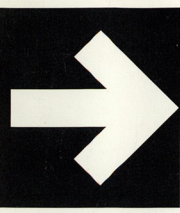


THE **XBOX THREAT** IS REAL! First looks at **Munch's Oddysee** & **Malice**

Lifecycle 2 Vol3 #3 03/01

Next Generation Magazine



Next Gen

METAL GEAR SOLID 2

We played it! It rocks!

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REVIEWED:
**ALICE
THE BOUNCER
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Sega Dreamcast ■ Sony PlayStation 2 ■ Microsoft Xbox ■ PC

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Next Generation Magazine

Metal Gear Solid 2

It's the most talked-about game for PS2

And we've had our grubby hands all over it. Is Solid Snake still the best thing yet to happen to Sony's superconsole? The latest news begins on page 54.

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03/01



EDITORIAL

Win some, lose some



Video footage of *Metal Gear Solid 2* was revealed to the world on May 10 of last year, and when the game appeared on the cover of **NG 07/00**, many skeptics responded negatively. We were, as they put it, "wrong to positively endorse video footage" the way we did. Having done our homework, we defended that story, knowing all too well that Hideo Kojima has never, ever delivered a bad game. And while the brilliantly animated footage shown at the time was, in many places, taken from cut scenes, it was real-time — all the time.

Still, we felt there was no way we could put our friend Snake back on the cover until we could hold the controller ourselves and put the skeptics' minds at ease. Now, as we were the first U.S. journalists to play the *MGS2* demo, we have a special gift for you disbelievers: a beautiful, eight-page "we told you so" starting on page 56.

We also recognize that no one is perfect. Even game publishers that juggle AAA titles drop the occasional egg. This month, that company is Square, and the game is *The Bouncer*. While beautiful in concept and graphically cutting-edge (earning last October's cover spot), it leaves us wanting better gameplay. Watch us eat our words on page 78.

So as we move ever deeper into an intriguing 2001, I'd like to invite you all to continue to challenge our opinions. We'll admit when we're right and those ever-so-rare occasions when we're wrong. Oh, and maybe you'll notice there's no Nintendo coverage anywhere in this issue. To find out why, see page 18.

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— Tom Russo

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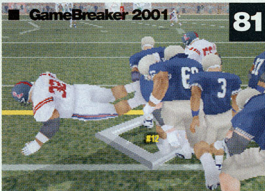
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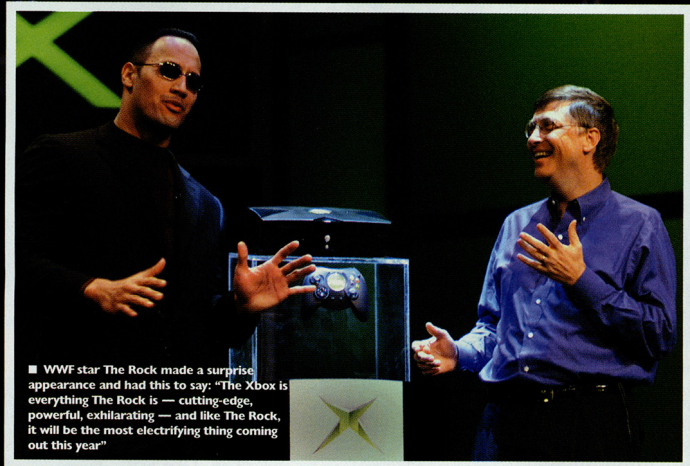
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Going out on a pleasant note

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→ News

Game industry news and analysis



■ WWF star The Rock made a surprise appearance and had this to say: "The Xbox is everything The Rock is — cutting-edge, powerful, exhilarating — and like The Rock, it will be the most electrifying thing coming out this year"

■ After about an hour of discussing trivial home appliances, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates unveiled at last the final industrial design of Xbox



■ The box is big, heavy, and darn cool. The controller may look strange, but it's designed for comfort

■ THE WINTER OF OUR XCONTENT

Can you smell what Xbox is cooking?

Gates unveils the finished Xbox at CES, proving once and for all that Microsoft's threat to PlayStation 2 and GameCube is real

➔ While we've been following the development of Xbox for some time and have liked everything the seemingly bright and ambitious Xbox team at Microsoft have had to say, we were wondering when the hell they were going to put their product

where their collective mouth was. As we all know too well, failure in the game industry preys upon businesses both great and small. So when Bill Gates, Microsoft Chairman and Chief Software Architect (a.k.a. the new Father Christmas of world health) strolled out onto the CES stage this past Jan. 6, we were hoping that we'd see something tangible that reflected the ideology being preached from the Redmond, Wash. mountaintop. We needed to see something that delivered the promise of those tech specs and demos that had been revealed 10 months before.

And that's pretty much what we got — that and a surprise visit from WWF superstar The Rock.

After pulling the black velvet wrap off of the industrial design of the unit and explaining some of

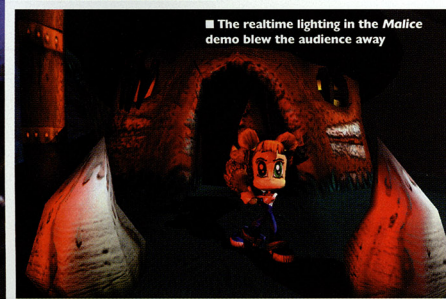
the features to the crowd, Gates introduced us once again to Seamus Blackley, who in turn introduced us to the first two Xbox games the company has publicly shown, Argonaut's *Malice* and Oddworld Inhabitant's *Munch's Oddysee* — both of which, Blackley insisted, were running on development kits that provide only one-fifth of the power the final hardware.

The games looked impressive — certainly as good as anything currently running on PS2: extremely high-poly (and, in some cases, self-shadowing) characters, beautifully lit environments, and crisp audio. Surprisingly, both

games were playable, and we were able to grab the controller and run around in each one.

Munch's Oddysee looked almost as good as a pre-rendered movie, and though far from feature-complete, a few notable Oddworld gameplay quirks were already in the factory level we got to play. For example, players could guide Abe to the other Mudokan slaves and use the gamespeak to guide them to levers on the other side of the level. It was amazing to see the thought that has already gone into the gameplay. "Great games are ultimately built on constraints," explains Oddworld President Lorne Lanning. "Asteroids and Robotron

■ The realtime lighting in the *Malice* demo blew the audience away



The games looked impressive — certainly as good as anything currently running on PS2

were built on extremely simple chemistries that they were able to ramp and ramp and ramp, and in a similar sort of philosophy we have characters that we can give handicaps to. We build in limitations to provide more challenge for them in the environment and then we compensate for them in different ways." We saw this philosophy in action when we took control of Munch, who can plod slowly on one foot, yet moves surprisingly fast in his wheelchair.

Malice also looked absolutely breathtaking. In the demo, players take control of Alice, an anime-style heroine, as she descends into several strange worlds. In the demo, Alice was shrunk to a very small size and players could explore an area — perhaps under a kitchen sink — complete with

pipeworks and cockroaches. Alice's most interesting feature is her giant, highly detailed hammer, which can be used to smash cockroaches in a variety of ways (our favorite? The push mower of sorts that steamrolls over them all). Later in the level, Alice uses her hammer as a key and unlocks a giant steam-powered robotic clone of herself. In a nice bit of self parody, the robotic clone mimics Alice in a way very reminiscent of the original Raven/Robot demos.

After the demos, we sat down with Xbox Creative Director Horace Luke and Chief Xbox Officer Robert Bach for a hands-on with the final controller. The controller is actually larger than what we're used to. According to Luke, the reasoning

behind this is comfort. "People play games for 2 to 3 hours at a time," he explains. "So the control has to be totally transparent to your hands. It has to be an extension of your fingertips. The fatigue between 5 minutes and 3 hours should not be so hard that you feel pain." The design did feel comfortable despite the overall odd shape. Still, Bach admits, "We are looking at slightly different-sized form factor for Japan."

Also strange to the uninitiated is the fact that the two analog sticks aren't symmetrical — but Bach stresses that this is absolutely deliberate. "While the design guys probably would have preferred to have symmetrical sticks, we said no," Bach told us. "We're not going to have symmetrical sticks because having the two things you want to play at the bottom of the pad probably isn't the best place for them." Luke elaborates: "We really focused on what the user experience was going to be and had that determine the final form." This philosophy even determined how long each controller cable was going to be — 9 feet — since gamers usually sit across the living room from the TV.

We also took a close look at the final industrial design of the box. Surprisingly, despite the industry's trend towards smaller machines, Xbox is a fairly sizable piece of hardware, easily bigger — and heavier — than any other system. But the design is smart. For example, Xbox has both vents on the side for cooling and a fan in the back that changes speed as needed. The thinking here is if

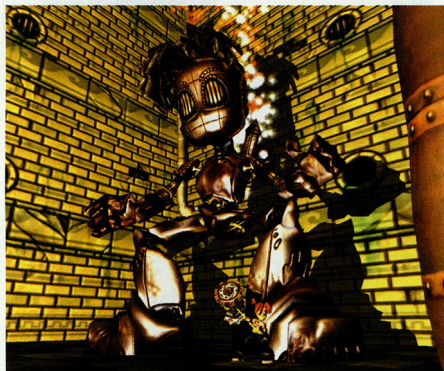


■ The detail in the Munch's Oddysee models is nothing short of staggering. Take control of the camera and zoom in on the characters, and they still look great. All this on a development system said to be running at a fifth of Xbox's total power

you're in an open space and don't need the fan, it will turn down and not make noise, but if you put the console in a small, enclosed space, where the fan won't be heard, the speed will pick up to compensate for the reduced air flow.

The only remaining question we had was this: Why reveal Xbox at CES, a show the videogame industry pulled out of six years ago? "We felt it was time to show people the box was real, and you have to have an event to do that," Bach responds. "It would have been a little goofy to create a separate event to have Bill stand up there and go like this [makes a curtain-raising motion], and we didn't want to wait until E3. The fact is, since we're working with developers, people are going to see it anyway." Still, if it looks like Microsoft tipped its hand early, Bach says there are still tons of things left to reveal. "There's a lot of other games we could talk about but we didn't because we want to do that at TGS and E3. Spring TGS and E3 will both be big shows of ours."

NextGen



■ The end of the Malice demo featured the game's heroine, Alice, mimicked by a giant robot standing behind her. The last jump (where the robot gets lodged in the ceiling) was a nice twist

■ BITS FROM THE EDGE

News Bytes

→ **This just in: American McGee's Alice is headed to the big screen.** As is *Tomb Raider*. As is *Kalisto's Nightmare Creatures*. As is *Tecmo's Dead or Alive*. As is *Final Fantasy* (and a movie sequel is already rumored). The never-really-well-received *Nocturne* is about to become a TV series. As is *Metal Gear*. Movies, including *Gladiator*, and several other less worthy contenders —

and even those that aren't even out yet, such as Dreamworks' forthcoming computer-animated, fairytale-centric *Shrek* — continue their flood onto game systems. It reminds News Bytes of that old Herman Melville quote, which we can guarantee few in the game industry have ever heard (or at least heeded): "It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation." At least there are no *Moby Dick* games.

Of course, one place originality will definitely earn a failure is on Game Boy. Our sources tell us that sales of non-licensed games typically hover around 5 to 10% of those of any licensed game. Ouch.

Speaking of sources, some can't keep their big traps shut (those are the ones we love), and one of them keeps talking to *The New York Times*, assuring that Nintendo has

been in sporadic talks to take over the ailing Sega. While Sega and Nintendo spokespeople didn't actually threaten to kill the *Times*' reporters who wrote the stories, they did do the PR equivalent — both companies issued vigorous denials. (Was it us, or were Sega's denials of the story, which sent the company's stock soaring 10%, a little less vigorous than Nintendo's, which saw its stock price nosedive on the news?)

When it comes to squelching stories, you have to hand it to Ziff-Davis. It just so happened that the first shots of Xbox leaked from the pages of *EGM* all over the Internet well before the contractual NDA expired. Yet Ziff's lawyers went into immediate action, firing off cease-and-desist letters (as well as friendly, "please take those down" letters) faster than you can say "lawsuit." That didn't stop Ziff's

■ YOU ARE SUCH A CHARACTER

3Q Makes Gaming Personal

Cloning booths create 3D facial skins with a realistic touch

➔ Tired of the "unique" Quake skins that just about everyone seems to be using? Then step into 3Q's Q Clone Generator and create a character model that's as original as you are. Q Clone Generators project a random light pattern on a person's face to capture an image with synchronized digital cameras. The result is a 2,000-polygon texture map in 24-bit color of a gamer's face taken in .008 seconds, which creates a precise image and eliminates any blur from movement.

"Even when reducing the structure and texture maps to



■ Users can review and manipulate their skins before they're finalized

200 polygons (to work with low-end systems), our images remain accurate and can clearly reproduce people of any ethnic origin," says 3Q CEO Chris Lane. "Our technology can run in excess of 20 frames per second, and we'll introduce this ability to

the booths when game engines can process true 3D motion." At \$25 a pop for your image burned onto a take-home CD, this is probably a luxury reserved for hardcore gamers with a lot of disposable income. While some may find having a realistic image of themselves blown to bits via a rocket launcher a bit unnerving, Lane doesn't think people will take their virtual demise too personally. "Multiplayer games are increasingly sophisticated, and the shooting is less significant in the overall development of your character's place in a fantasy world. Besides, two clicks of the mouse and you're back [in the game!]"

3Q's clones are compatible with games using the Half-Life engine, including Counter-Strike and Half-Life: Opposing Force, as well as Quake III Arena. Upcoming Q Clone-compatible titles include Star Trek: Elite Force, Return to Castle

Wolfenstein, The Sims, Duke Nukem Forever, and Unreal Tournament. Q Clone Generators are currently installed at Babbage's Etc. outlets in San Jose, Calif., Seattle, and Dallas, and are

planned for Springfield, Mass., New Jersey, and London.

— Kevin Toyama



■ The cabinet is reminiscent of old Polaroid photo booths



■ Next Gen editor Eric Bratcher gets into the game



own GameSpot from reporting the story, though. Microsoft, in a fit of we're not quite sure what, denied that the shots, clearly, of the real machine, were of the real machine. Of course, this was all confirmed three days later when Bill Gates revealed the machine at CES. (See our lead news story on page 8 for more official shots.)

One story Microsoft would probably like to squelch is that

of Wild Tangent, the new online episodic content company from ex-Microsoft-DirectX-evangelist-who-got-Bill-Gates-to-possess-as-a-demon-in-Doom-holding-a-shotgun-then-got-fired-and-has-since-been-a-major-thorn-in-Microsoft's-side Alex St. John. Bad news: Wild Tangent just signed ex-id artist Paul Steed. One thing the so-outspoken-that-it-got-him-fired-from-ID Steed won't

do is quiet Wild Tangent down.

Speaking of Nintendo (OK, we weren't, but whatever), is it us, or is this the only company to continuously disprove Moore's Law? How, after 11 years of production, can Game Boy cart wholesale prices suddenly be going up \$1? That wouldn't be because, oh, we don't know, Nintendo is soaking its third parties, could it? No... And neither could the

(also new) added 60 days of production time for Game Boy carts be due to the fact that the company wants to ensure that it's the only one with software available for the launch of GBA? We didn't think so.

Speaking of Game Boy Advance, word from developers, and from ECTS attendees, is that the system doesn't feel as "solid" as the Game Boy Color, but that once the screen

lights up (figuratively, of course), you don't even notice. This handheld Super-SNES may be the ultimate 2D gaming platform — word on the street is that several major 2D franchises will make a stunning return on the system... (cough) Megaman (cough) Castlevania (cough).

— Compiled by Carrie Shepherd, Executive News Editor, DailyRadar.com

03/01

Function Over Form

→ Xbox may be the shape of things to come. After its very public unveiling at the Consumer Electronics Show, Xbox has already become something of a design icon in the console business, standing out quite smartly in a scene that's currently saturated with new systems (GameCube, PS2, even Indrema), each of which uses a dramatically different concept for their final industrial designs. Out of that bunch, Xbox is unexpectedly the most traditionally console-esque, taking its

cues from systems like N64 and Panasonic's 3DO.

Sony's (and Indrema's) decision to go with a vertically standing unit was intriguing, but Xbox is designed to sit horizontally, and conventionally, under a TV. The thinking behind this is the result of months of research and experimentation — Creative Director Horace Luke took pictures of dozens of videogame households,

looking for the most typical and practical setups. The plain old floor-bound console was easily the most common, in spite of the fact that focus groups almost always requested a stackable, component-style solution. "That's just not the way people used them," says Luke. "People simply didn't put stuff on top of their consoles."

Games like *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2X* will be Internet-enabled right out of the box.



Xbox's curves do, however, permit the stacking of other components if the consumer so wishes. "The curve is such that the little rubber feet on other systems will easily span

it and stand on the Xbox," explains Luke. "It's also exactly flat enough so that you can place a disc on top without it sliding off."



■ The final design isn't quite as visually striking as the gleaming, X-shaped prototype, but what it lacks in flash it makes up for in functionality

The X-FILES

In designing the system, Luke surrounded himself with objects, images, and photographs that best expressed what he was trying to achieve. His design office is liberally adorned with cool stuff — from the latest Gillette razor to the Audi TT. With so much silver metallic surrounding him, it was a little surprising that the system finally appeared in all black. Luke explains this decision was practical rather than aesthetic. “We can make black plastics easily, but silver requires a coating process,” he says. “And in the average gaming environment those coatings take a lot of punishment. They get scratched very easily.”

The design of the rear of the console is just as interesting as the more aesthetically charged front, while the bland, almost featureless back includes just three ports: power, Ethernet (for

broadband connection), and a digital AV connector that will support all protocols up to and including HDTV. Xbox General Manager J Allard also confirmed that the port could indeed support a VGA signal, but he notes, “That one is entirely dependent on consumer demand. If they want it, we’ll do it.” The unit will most likely ship to retail with a stereo AV composite cable, but S-Video and component video “kits” will be available at launch.

The inclusion of both an Ethernet port and a hard drive is key to Microsoft’s strategy and might give the company the ability to leapfrog over Sony in this regard come launch time, and games like *Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater 2X* will be Internet-enabled out of the box. Sony has yet to reveal its broadband plans and will be saddled with the Herculean challenge of selling an

“That one [VGA support] is entirely dependent on consumer demand. If they want it, we’ll do it.”

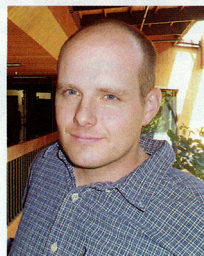
— Xbox General Manager J Allard

expensive peripheral to some occasionally bitter PlayStation 2 owners.

The ports on the front of the system also speak volumes about Microsoft’s true Xbox concept. Often erroneously referred to as a “set-top box”, Xbox is in fact a straight-up videogame console. The controller ports, which use USB protocol, are deliberately reconfigured in a different oval shape, precisely to move away from the idea that this system is a computer in disguise. And the controllers that plug into them contain practically every good joystick feature from every other system. The controllers are large enough to incorporate two memory card slots, two analog sticks,

one direction pad, six surface-mounted fire buttons (*Street Fighter* fans, now, please relax), a couple of under-pad triggers, and, of course, a large green eye. The big pads feel a lot like the Saturn analog stick used primarily for the game *Nights*.

There are however, a few things missing from this first industrial build, such as the row of trademarked logos that normally adorn a DVD player. By now you’ll have heard that the Xbox DVD capability is activated by the purchase of a remote controller and driver bundle — both available at launch. Microsoft is trying to ensure that customers don’t buy a system from EB and then stroll across the mall to



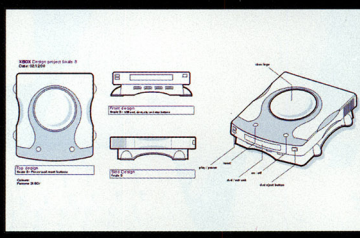
■ Frank O'Connor is the Editor-in-Chief of Daily Radar Consoles. This will be his last column, as he now pumps gas most evenings

Tower Records to buy movies. This is, after all, a game machine first and foremost. The DVD drivers are expected to outperform the PS2’s, but like the Sony system, you’ll have to plug in a possibly ungainly infrared receiver. Given the fact that practically every PS2 owner now has a remote control, it’s unlikely that this will hamper Xbox’s success. **NextGen**

EX BOXES

The Internet can always be relied upon as a prime source of scuttlebutt, rumor, and outright nonsense. The frenzy of speculation surrounding the supposed appearance of Xbox easily surpassed that of previous consoles. The “leaked designs” and “insider views” of the system perforated web sites all over the world. Many made incorrect assumptions, bad

guesses, and obvious calls. One, a doctored CD walkman, forgot that the system would need a hard drive, a cooling fan, and an Ethernet adapter. Most were tragically wrong. Microsoft’s Ed Fries laughs at this: “We’d see new ones every day. My favorite is the green one that looks like an ice cream sandwich.”



■ EASIER DOES IT

Dreamcast's Budget Development Kit

Wanna make cheap games? Sega may have a plan for you

➔ With Sega all but abandoning the hardware market, the company is looking at non-traditional ways to keep support going for Dreamcast. To this end, the company will offer a new, low-cost Dreamcast development kit that could enable game designers to produce low-cost games that can be played on the Internet. The kit, currently dubbed the

Independent Developer Toolkit (IDT), will be available in the fall of this year.

Unlike a standard development kit, which requires a proprietary and expensive Dreamcast development box in addition to a standard PC, the IDT will require nothing more than a PC and a standard Dreamcast unit. The toolkit will ship with software and a specialized cable that will

connect an off-the-shelf Dreamcast to a PC. Currently the plan is for the cable to use an SCSI connection on the PC side, but that may change before release. Once the Dreamcast is connected to the PC and the

programming tools have been installed, the toolkit is ready for use.

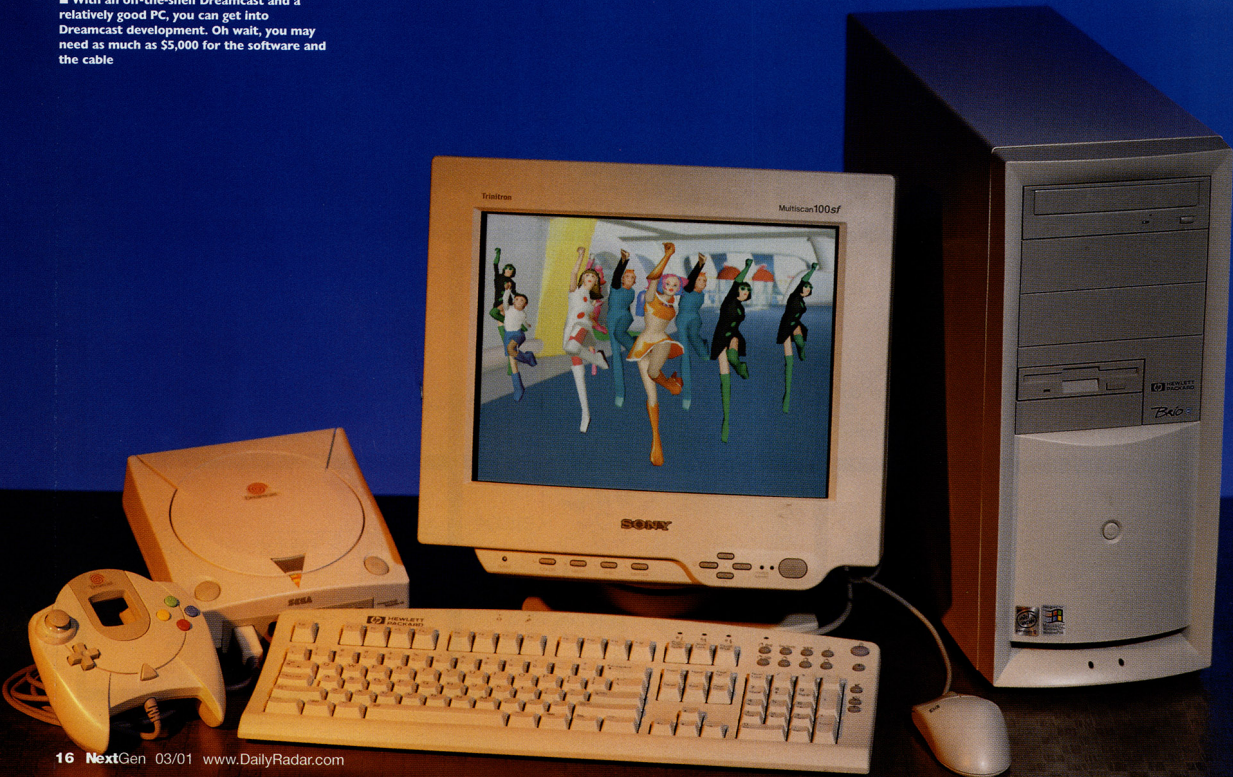
It's still not cheap

The biggest advantage to the Independent Developer Toolkit is going to be cost. A

full-fledged development station can cost a software company between \$15,000 and \$20,000. (Considering Xbox dev kits are running roughly the equivalent to that, we think the Dreamcast kits must have depreciated some.) Yet Sega estimates that the new IDT will sell to developers for \$5,000 or less. This lower price point might make it attractive to

Unlike a standard development kit ... the IDT will require nothing more than a PC and a standard Dreamcast unit.

■ With an off-the-shelf Dreamcast and a relatively good PC, you can get into Dreamcast development. Oh wait, you may need as much as \$5,000 for the software and the cable





■ Users of the Independent Developer Toolkit won't have the technical resources to make *Shenmue* (left) but a puzzle game like *Sega Swirl* (right) is certainly within reach

established developers who may have considered something for a home console but avoided it because of the cost of entry. But with a price tag in the neighborhood of \$5,000, the kit is probably still far too costly to be considered something for hobbyists. (Sony introduced its hobbyist PlayStation dev kit, the Net Yaruze, in 1997 for less than \$800, but the machine was considered to be fairly underpowered, and the Yaruze support network was next to nonexistent.)

According to Charles Bellfield, Sega of America's Vice President of Marketing Communications, Sega is hoping that developers with the new kit will be able to create games and applications that traditional videogame developers would never have considered. Some of that content is going to be web-based games.

"Opening up a development cycle in the independent developer community allows for more unique content to reach the platform," Bellfield says. "Our future is all about delivering online content."

What kind of games?

Bellfield suggests that there are opportunities for developers to create casual games, including anything from checkers or chess to platform-style games, with a focus on ease of development, integration of Internet play, and online competition. He cites the online puzzle game *Sega Swirl* as one example of a game that could be easily developed on the IDT.

In fact, Bellfield doesn't see independent developers using the IDT to produce fully immersive videogames. Sega expects developers with this kit to focus on games that are simpler and lower-cost, yet have a broader appeal beyond the traditional videogaming demographics. Because the licensed developer model and the independent developer model are targeting two completely different types of products, Sega doesn't foresee any problems with the two programs coexisting. Games produced in the IDT program would be available at lower price points than standard Dreamcast games, putting them squarely in the

"impulse purchase" bracket. The IDT, unlike Sony's Net Yaruze, could let developers with a decent little game actually make a profit from it.

And because many developers start out as PC programmers, Sega has worked with Microsoft to refine the Windows CE tools. Bellfield believes the Windows CE tools are perfect for new developers, because they allow the developers to work in a familiar environment instead of being forced to learn an entirely new set of proprietary APIs.

Hassle-free development

IDT users will also be free of the restrictions placed on licensed developers. As with any game console, licensed developers must strictly follow the console manufacturers' guidelines or risk having their software rejected. This makes perfect sense for "officially licensed" software, but the restriction has a chilling effect on creativity as developers fear to stray too far from established styles.

If the online community is any indication, Sega can expect a wide variety of software to result from the freedom offered by the IDT program. A quick scan of the web reveals a number of technical documents on the Dreamcast and a fair number of freeware utilities already

The IDT, unlike Sony's Net Yaruze, could let developers with a decent little game actually make a profit from it.

available for the system, many of which are created by hobbyist Dreamcast developers who have reverse-engineered the system. All sorts of tools, from video players to emulators for older systems, are already available. As far as Sega is concerned, the online development community is welcome to work on Dreamcast software using freeware tools as long as no copyright infringement is attempted.

"Anything that does not pirate copyrighted content," Bellfield states, "we strongly encourage. We want to embrace the creative talent and the opportunities that an independent development community can bring to the platform."

The release of the Independent Developer Toolkit is still at least five months off, and it will be a few more months after that before anything substantial can be actually produced with it. Considering that 2001 looks to be a difficult year for Sega — with Xbox and GameCube coming to market and PlayStation 2 already there — the IDT opens up Sega's Dreamcast to some potentially new revenue

streams. And while the toolkit is not likely to cause much more than a ripple within the videogame industry as a whole, it is a proposition that could pay off for both Sega and videogamers everywhere. Still, if the kit is priced at \$5,000 with only the promise of "lite" games, it remains to be seen how many IDT takers there are out there.

— Adam Pavlaka

HARDCORE

Electronics Boutique called to tell me that Quake II for N64 came in. I didn't have a ride, and it's a 26-mile road trip. So I grab my bike and head to the mall in the mega-summer heat and humidity. I finally get there and find out that the power went out 15 minutes before I got there on the entire east side of town. I already paid for it and didn't have enough cash to get it at another store, so I rode back home — Quake-less. The next morning I got on my bike and rode back to the mall, got Quake II finally, and rode home. It was cool, worth the 52 miles of biking.

Derek Adams
Center Barnstead, NH

Do you have a hardcore story? If so, send it to us. If we print it, we'll send you a free Next Gen T-shirt. Email your true tales of gaming madness to ngonline@imaginemedia.com. Please use "hardcore" as the subject line.

"Opening up a development cycle in the independent developer community allows for more unique content to reach the platform."

— Charles Bellfield, VP of Marketing Communications, Sega

In the Studio

Development news as it develops

03/01



A MUCKY SEQUEL TO BLADE

→ U.K. developer Mucky Foot has signed a deal with Activision to create a game based on the *Blade* movie sequel due out next year. "We're working on a new game for Activision, and it's the game of the movie of the sequel to *Blade*," Director Mike Diskett told *Edge* magazine. "We're not sure when the movie's coming out, but it's around March 2002. It'll probably come across to every platform going, but initially it's going to be PlayStation 2 only. It'll launch on PS2." Neither Mucky Foot nor Activision have made an official comment on the news.

Jonny Moseley



TAKING WINTER TO THE EXTREME

→ 3DO has locked up freestyle champion skier Jonny Moseley to endorse and co-design a series of next-generation extreme skiing games, but the 1998 U.S. Olympic gold medal mogul skier isn't the only notable winter sports celeb in the game business. Work is also progressing on five-time world snowboarding champion Shaun Palmer's game. *Shaun Palmer's Pro Boarder X* is being developed for PlayStation 2 by UEP Systems, the Japanese developer that created the *Cool Boarders* franchise. It will be published by Activision this year.

VALVE PLUMBS NEW FACTORY

→ Keep an eye out for Escape Factory, a new Seattle-area game development house that will incorporate technology developed by Valve Software. The company, founded by ex-Microsoft employee James Gwertzman and ex-Silicon Graphics employee Ed Allard, actually began its work out of Valve's offices in August of last year, and they have now moved into their own space with a roster that includes former employees of Sega, Sierra, and Turbine Games. The company is hard at



work on its first game — when we know more about it, you will too.

Escape Factory

SAYONARA IRIMAJIRI

→ It's a long stretch of road between designing Formula One race car engines and leading the development of next-generation game consoles, but that's the life led by former Sega President Shoichiro Irimajiri... or was. Having taken the blame for poor Dreamcast sales, Irimajiri resigned his position as President of Sega of Japan in May of last year and became Sega's vice chairman in charge of researching a new post-Dreamcast console. But as it is becoming more apparent that Dreamcast could be Sega's last console, Irimajiri's services may no longer be required. He has announced he will be leaving Sega by the end of January. The question is, will Irimajiri find a new home in the game industry or return to his automobile industry roots? Japanese news source *The Nihon Keizai Shimbun* has reported that Irimajiri will continue to be an outside director of Delphi Automotive Systems, as he has done since 1999.



■ YOUR PAD OR MINE?

Out of control

Don't think the Dual Shock 2 is the best controller of all time? Here are some variations on the theme...



■ Pelican's Freedom Shock 2 is expensive, but it's wireless. You can even use it as a DVD remote

■ The Mad Catz Dual Force 2. For twenty bones, you can't go wrong



Mad Catz Dual Force 2

MSRP: \$19.99

➔ The cheapest controller in our lineup proved to be our favorite. Slightly larger than the Dual Shock 2, it rivals the comfort of the Pelican pads and Interact's Dual Impact 2. The rubberized, contoured handles rest beautifully in the hand, and while the analog sticks could use a little more resistance, their non-contoured surface provides plenty of grip. The Start and Select buttons are moved up and to the side (a location we actually grew to prefer); there's a steering wheel mode; and you can program macros into L2&3 and R2&3.

Pelican Freedom Shock 2

MSRP: \$49.95

➔ If you've got the scratch, at least test-drive the caddy. This controller is nearly identical to Pelican's Retro Shock 2 controller (above right), with the same strengths and weaknesses. It is also completely wireless (cue clouds parting and angels singing) up to either 20 or 30 feet (depending on whether you trust the box or the manual) and signal response is excellent and consistent. Avoid the first production run (identifiable by a short antenna that hangs from the receiver housing), which didn't perform as well as current versions. This bad boy isn't cheap, to be sure, and there are controllers that feel better in the hand. However, when we realized you can play from anywhere — the couch, the kitchen table, the bath tub — we felt truly blessed.

Interact StormChaser

MSRP: \$29.99

➔ While this pad adds rubberized handles, autofire capability, and an "axis switch" feature that swaps the function of the analog sticks, we greatly preferred Interact's cheaper offering (right). Deep contours underneath are uncomfortable, and while you can program almost every button, the total number of keystrokes is limited (hence, if one button is assigned 10 button presses, there will be only 2 button presses left to be spread over the rest of the keys. Yes, it's confusing). Finally, the shoulder buttons seem to be hinged on the pad's outside edge — a peculiar decision that makes easy-to-reach buttons remarkably difficult to press.



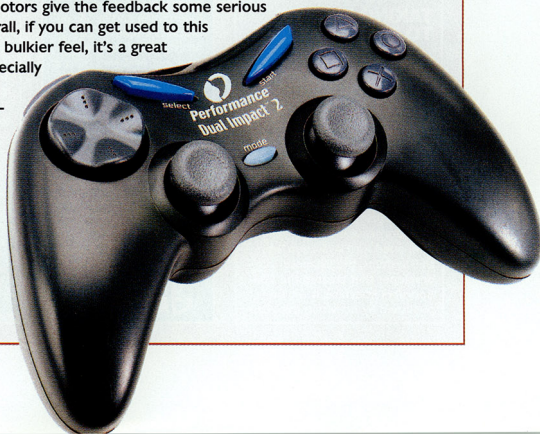
■ The StormChaser adds two programmable buttons to the controller's face

Interact Dual Impact 2

MSRP: \$24.99

➔ This controller's boomerang shape practically forces your thumbs to fall perfectly onto the excellent analog sticks, which feature nice deep divots so they practically adhere to your thumbs. The shoulder buttons, Select, and Start are all big and easy to reach; L3 and R3 feel solid and definite; and the D-Pad is both unusual and nice. Plus, the powerful vibration motors give the feedback some serious growl. Overall, if you can get used to this controller's bulkier feel, it's a great choice, especially for gamers with grown-up-sized paws.

■ Interact's controllers owe much more to Microsoft's Sidewinder pads than Sony's Dual Shock



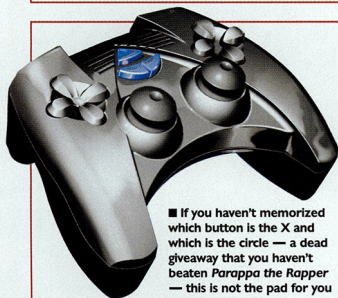


■ Every single controller we tested was slightly larger than the regular Dual Shock 2

Pelican Retro Shock 2

MSRP: \$24.95

➔ The rubberized handles to this pad are nearly parallel, but it's still quite comfortable. Pelican's D-Pad is simply the best ever. The shoulders are beautifully contoured, and the sticks are nice and tacky to prevent slippage. Weaknesses? Buttons and sticks are so loose that fine control takes practice, and the Analog, Start, and Select buttons are a pain to hit, awkwardly jammed into a cluster in the pad's very center. Lastly, while there is a Program button, it only enables you to remap buttons, not to program macros.



■ If you haven't memorized which button is the X and which is the circle — a dead giveaway that you haven't beaten *Parappa the Rapper* — this is not the pad for you

Joytech Analog Controller Plus 2

MSRP: \$24.99

➔ This controller discards the now classic circle, square, triangle, and X button symbols, so if you need them for reference, steer clear. Actually, steer clear anyway — the finger contours under the pad are very deep, leading to a tendency to hold the controller at a very awkward angle in which your hands are too vertical; the shoulder buttons are difficult to reach because of the controller's sharp corners; Select and Start are too close together; and our thumbs kept sliding around the mushroom-headed analog sticks. Compared to a Dual Shock 2, the vibration is stronger, but slower. Simply put, don't buy this.

Nyko Omega 2

MSRP: \$29.99

➔ Physically, Nyko's new pad is nearly identical to the Mad Catz entry, but with slightly less comfortable tapered handles. The analog sticks have the same great shape and are very tightly calibrated — easily the most responsive we tested. There's also an added steering wheel mode and turbo button for tweekers. A nice, solid pad. However, the start button's new location (directly between the analog sticks) is both puzzling and inconvenient, and the controller cord, which measures in at just under six feet — a full two feet shorter than the cord of every other pad — is a notable and literal shortcoming. Nonetheless, a very solid pad overall.



■ Nyko's Viper 2 was preferable in most ways to the original Dual Shock, so it's no surprise that the Omega 2 is a quality pad

→ Alphas

Next Generation hunts down
and previews the best new games

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■ Whether blondes have more fun may never be decided, but it's an undeniable fact that the bad guys always do. Now, you can see how it feels

■ PLAYSTATION 2

LEGACY OF KAIN: BLOOD OMEN II

■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Developer: Crystal Dynamics ■ Release Date: Q4 ■ Origin: US

Lock up the children in Nosgoth — gaming's most brutal anti-hero returns for more blood



→ The world loves a bad-ass. Think for a moment, if you will, about your favorite videogame villain. Maybe it's *Street Fighter II*'s cape-wearing wrecking machine, M. Bison, *Final Fantasy VII*'s wickedly powerful Sephiroth, or perhaps even *Shenmue*'s ruthless master of the deadly arts, Lan Di. Whomever you favor, chances are there was some point during the game where you thought, at least for a moment, that it would be much cooler if you could just control the bad guy himself instead of the weaker, no-talent hack you were trying to take up against

him. In fact, the best villains are more compelling than all but the most heroic protagonist. Face it — how many people actually thought that Luke Skywalker was cooler than Darth Vader?

Thus, when we learned that the next game in Crystal Dynamics' vampiric *Legacy of Kain* series would return to the original title's main character — the bloodsucking anti-hero-turned-supervillain Kain, we immediately took notice. While still quite early in development, the major elements of *Blood Omen II* are already in place, and they quickly set the game apart from



■ The game takes place some 200 years after the end of the original *Blood Omen*, though the series continues to play fast and loose with timelines and even dimensions



■ We know the story involves Kain's quest to recover his sword, the Soul Reaver, which has apparently been stolen. Who would be crazy enough to do that is still under wraps

→ Alphas



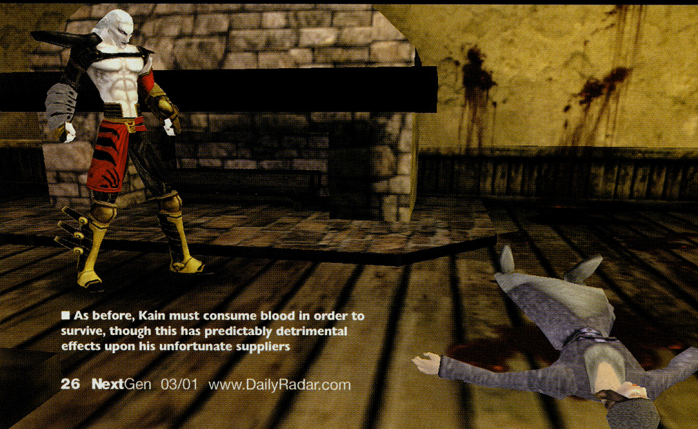
■ In the first *Blood Omen*, Kain could morph into a bat or werewolf and cast spells like *Flay*, *Implode*, or *Decay*. It has yet to be revealed whether any of these abilities will make it into the new game, but he seems well equipped to defend himself nonetheless

Kain punched his hand completely through his target's body, then opened his fist, dropping the man's heart to the ground.

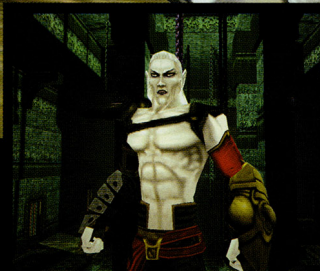
Raziel's puzzle-filled adventures. Like Kain himself, this game is darker and more fearsome, and it doesn't hesitate to shed blood by the bucketful.

"First of all, we wanted it to be a lot of fun to play an evil character," says Lead Designer Mike Ellis. The easiest way to do this with Kain was simply to get him good and angry (for example, by taking away his

sword, the Soul Reaper, along with much of his power), then set him loose among the masses to kick ass and take names. As in the original game, Kain must also imbibe rather large amounts of blood in order to sustain himself. He is, after all, a vampire. Ellis explains, "It's not 'look at us, loads of blood, isn't it cool?' — but a vampire game without blood would be like a racing game without fast cars."



■ As before, Kain must consume blood in order to survive, though this has predictably detrimental effects upon his unfortunate suppliers



■ We're getting kind of tired of pointing out how fantastic PS2's ultra-high-polygon models look, but it can't be ignored, and this is no exception

Of course, there's no guarantee that people will take the neck-gnawing lying down. Each character you encounter will react dynamically to Kain, depending upon his actions and appearance. If you walk toward a soldier or a peasant girl with nothing in your hands, they may not even notice you. However, if you approach the girl with a drawn sword, she'll flee (possibly to call in reinforcements), and the soldier will command you to sheathe your weapon. If you don't comply, he'll attack. That's where the game completely separates itself.

Simply put, *Blood Omen II* boasts one of the most brutally detailed hand-to-hand combat models ever seen on a console. In our demo, a soldier attacked Kain with a sidelong slash, followed by an overhead chop and a backhand slash, all of which were smoothly deflected by Kain using three different blocking animations. Kain then dispatched the poor wretch with a

RAISING KAIN

The original *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain* was quite successful upon its release in 1996, selling over a million copies. Unfortunately, a heated legal dispute broke out between Crystal Dynamics and Silicon Knights, both of whom claimed the rights to further development on the franchise (the two had co-developed the project, though who contributed what remains unclear). Eventually, Silicon Knights (currently one of Nintendo's second parties, working on a psychological thriller for GameCube, *Too Human*) had to move on, and Crystal was given rights to Kain. Current plans have split the franchise into two separate series: *Blood Omen* titles will embody Kain's adventures, while the *Soul Reaver* games will focus on Raziel's ongoing quest to get revenge upon Kain. A new entry in one series or the other will appear every year. Sounds great, as long as the developers don't wait until the fifth game in each series before updating the game engines.





■ Every enemy has unique fighting styles and attack combinations. The good news is you can use this mystery woman's dagger; the bad news is you have to pry it from her cold, dead fingers

BEAUTY ISN'T EVEN SKIN DEEP

For all their mythological sex appeal, most vampires are so unattractive they couldn't find a partner for the Monster Mash if they dumped Spanish Fly into the punch bowl at the Halloween Ball. Just take a look...

Kain



Okay, he's clearly fit for his age, but without a shirt, he'll never get served in any nice restaurants. And yes, some chicks dig the long hair, but it needs some Grecian formula, and unless he's in a band, the makeup has to go.

Raziel



Sure, skin color shouldn't matter, but Raz is blue. He's also uncomfortably skinny, and while the shawl may work for granny, it makes him look like a sissy. Plus, no woman is going to tolerate all those stories about "back when I had wings, and a lower mandible..."

Dracula (Bela Lugosi)



Even the classic representation had his faults. The widow's peak hairdo hasn't been cool for decades, possibly centuries. Plus, the speech impediment (vocalic accent and spiffy tux betray the fact that this out-of-touch geek is simply trying too hard.

Nosferatu



While he may have been popular as the college buddy who always "took one for the team," this poor sap simply looks too much like a starving, pointy-eared, fallen-from-grace Curly Joe Neal to be anything but hopeless.

Lestat



Tom Cruise's puffy-shirt-wearing vamp seems to be an exception to our rule. However, his sexual tastes involve everything including the kitchen sink. Maybe it's time Goose sat Maverick down for a talk.



vicious combo and picked up his fallen foe's blade, gaining a whole new set of attacks, parries, and finishing moves with which to face two new attackers. Control is already solid and intuitive, and the innumerable animations give combat a very compelling, almost organic look and feel.

Despite Kain's hand-to-hand prowess, stealth remains crucial to success. Quenching your thirst for blood in a darkened alleyway can help avoid the hostility that comes from tapping someone's jugular in the middle of a crowded street at midday. In fact, the high point of our demonstration was when we were shown one of Kain's stealth kills — sneaking up behind a night watchman, Kain punched his hand completely through his target's body, then opened his fist, dropping the man's heart to the ground. Not for the

squeamish, to be sure, but a gorehound's delight. And because this is a vampire game, Kain also boasts many requisite "creature of the night" super powers, from the ability to vanish into the shadows to "dark glyph" skills like super-leaping and charm spells. "Mind control," Ellis explains, "will be just one of the ways in which Kain can overcome problems. A sentry behind a locked gate, for instance, can be manipulated to open the gate for Kain." Talents such as these should open the door for gameplay elements more creative and compelling than typical adventure game puzzles (cough, please, no crates, cough)

Legacy of Kain: Blood Omen II is a long way off (Christmas, at the earliest), but we're very encouraged by what we see so far. This franchise has always featured strong storylines and great myths. The combat system looks fantastic, and Kain has

tremendous appeal as a main character. If you've ever played as the underdog and wished you could be the bad boy, here is your game. — Eric Bratcher/Nigel Edge



■ Not all of your opponents are easily dispatched peasants and common soldiers. Some are powerful enough to give Kain a serious challenge — or a whooping



■ The planes in Ace 4 are all based on real-world models and are so detailed that they almost look like the real thing



■ Just like in previous Ace Combat games, we expect that you'll be able to play from both first- and third-person perspectives



■ PLAYSTATION 2

ACE COMBAT 4

■ Publisher: Namco ■ Developer: Namco ■ Release Date: Summer (Japan) ■ Origin: Japan

What difference can one fighter plane make? Well, that's up to you...

→ It's easy to see why the Ace Combat series has such a hardcore following on PlayStation, since the game does an outstanding job of recreating Top Gun-style air battles (complete with same kind of soundtrack) with excellent graphics and tight control. Now, six years after the original release, Namco is reinventing the series on PlayStation 2 with better graphics, improved AI, and virtual battlefields that will make the

previous games seem puny in comparison.

Once again, the series intends to perfectly mix sim-style action with easily accessible controls. "We must first consider that the game must be readily playable, therefore it can't be a true simulation," points out Chief Game Designer Hiroyuki Ichinyagi. "While we will add some new features, the average player will still be able to dogfight easily." Among the new features that Ichinyagi mentions are the "special weapons" that have been added to your arsenal instead of the usual repertoire of just missiles and guns, such as bombs and missiles with an extended lock-on range.

By far, the most impressive thing about AC4 is the missions that will take place on large virtual battlefields. While this concept has been implemented in previous games, the scale on which they appear in AC4 is truly unprecedented for a console game. "In the long war missions, each side fights a total war against the other — fighter against fighter, tank against tank, and both sides battling it out like in a real war," explains Ichinyagi. "You are thrown into this war to show how much you can contribute to the overall victory, which



■ In the final game, two armies will be clashing below you and it'll be your job to lend air support where possible

means the player actually has the power to influence the results." This kind of virtual war just hasn't been possible on earlier systems, and it will be interesting to see how much the team can actually put onscreen at once.

As you can see from these early



■ The control has been deliberately kept simple so that anyone can dogfight



■ The terrain is breathtaking from a distance, but it suffers from some muddiness and visible texture seams up close

WELCOME TO TOP GUN

Believe it or not, the flying school featured in the 1986 film *Top Gun* really does exist — it's formally known as the Naval Fighters Weapons School, and it's where the United States' best pilots are trained for combat. Since the film, however, the location of the school has changed from Miramar Naval Air Base in San Diego to Fallon Naval Air Station just outside of Reno, Nevada, where it remains to this day.



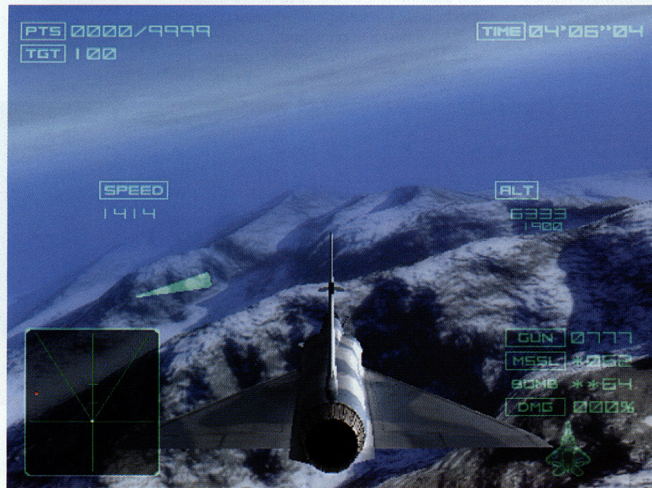
The graphics engine has risen quite nicely to the architectural challenge presented by the powerful PS2 hardware.

screenshots, the graphics engine has risen quite nicely to the architectural challenge presented by the powerful PS2 hardware. All the planes have been modeled after real-world counterparts (we've seen the F-22 and the French Mirage and Rafale), and their high polygon counts give them spectacular onscreen presence. The terrain engine has been enhanced so that it has a much greater

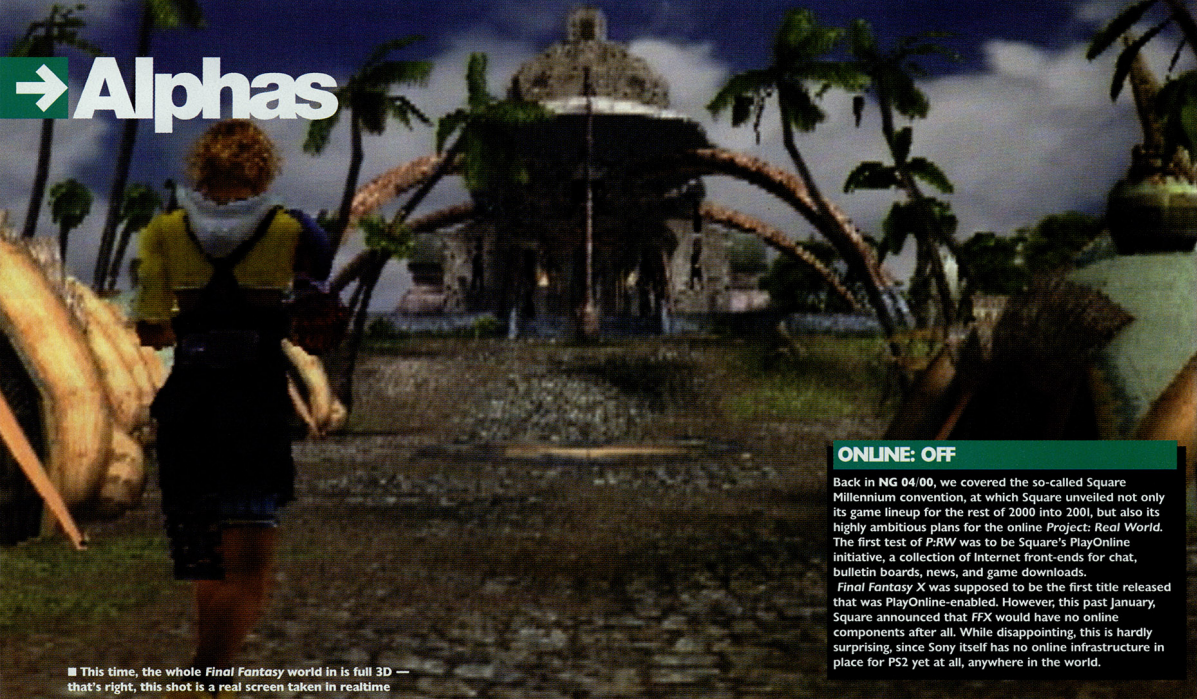
horizon line, but at this early state, the ground doesn't look so nice close-up — texture seams are clearly evident. Ichiyanagi claims that the technique he and his team are using is completely unconventional and, while it looks good now, they are still working very hard to improve upon their current level.

The early versions noticeably lacked the

virtual battlefield features that Ichiyanagi mentions, but they still showed an impressive amount of graphical detail, and we have faith that the team will be able to meet its ambitious goals. We hope when the game comes out this summer in Japan (and presumably fall in the U.S.), the team will have successfully navigated all the "danger zones" of new technology and will deliver a game that will "take our breath away." — *Blake Fischer*



■ You now have more than just missiles and guns to contend with your enemies — in this case you might want to use bombs to level your targets



■ This time, the whole *Final Fantasy* world is in full 3D — that's right, this shot is a real screen taken in realtime

ONLINE: OFF

Back in *NC 04/00*, we covered the so-called Square Millennium convention, at which Square unveiled not only its game lineup for the rest of 2000 into 2001, but also its highly ambitious plans for the online *Project: Real World*. The first test of *PRW* was to be Square's PlayOnline initiative, a collection of Internet front-ends for chat, bulletin boards, news, and game downloads. *Final Fantasy X* was supposed to be the first title released that was PlayOnline-enabled. However, this past January, Square announced that *FFX* would have no online components after all. While disappointing, this is hardly surprising, since Sony itself has no online infrastructure in place for PS2 yet at all, anywhere in the world.

PLAYSTATION 2

FINAL FANTASY X

■ Publisher: **Square** ■ Developer: **Square** ■ Release Date: **April (Japan)** ■ Origin: **Japan**

Once again: How can a “final” fantasy be up to part ten?

➔ Few games could have the potential to benefit from PlayStation 2 technology more than Square's next *Final Fantasy* title. Given that RPGs rarely require much in the way of heavy-duty game engine code, the struggle that has plagued numerous developers coming to grips with PlayStation 2's hardware isn't a major issue. What's more important, in capable hands PS2 graphics are guaranteed to be spectacular, and few companies have ever reached the state of CG art quite like the folks at Square. As a storytelling platform, PS2 is as close to perfect as

any console yet — perfect for a game that relies on a story told, and told well, with expressive characters you can identify with.

Final Fantasy X features Tidus, an underwater “Blitzball” player who's called upon to save the world... somehow (typically for Square, the company is being tight-lipped about many of even the most general story details). The female lead is Yuna, a “Summoner” from a family of Summoners (in fact her father is the High Summoner, don't you know?). Between the two of them — and doubtless a large cast of friends and confidants —

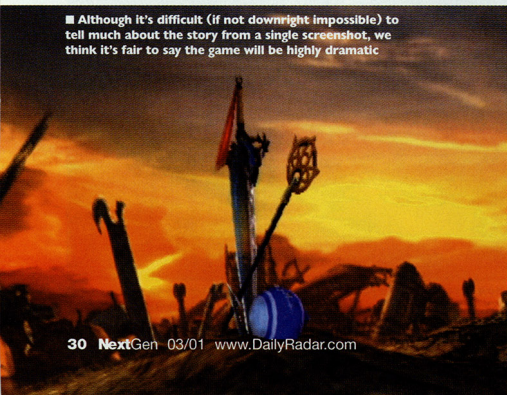
they struggle to literally drive Sin from the land.

For the first time in the history of the *Final Fantasy* series, the game's world will be presented in full 3D. Also for the first time, the game will feature voice performers for the characters (how much voiceover, for how many characters, is unknown at press time). Square has also been working on a detailed facial animation system, as well as a host of new special effects.

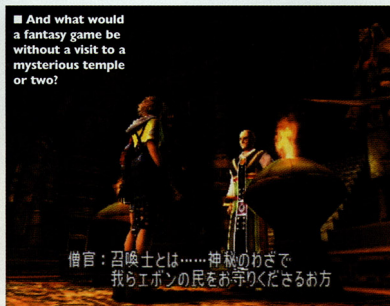
We'll know more come Japan's April release, yet a fully translated *FFX* won't likely come to the U.S. until this fall.

— Jeff Lundrigan

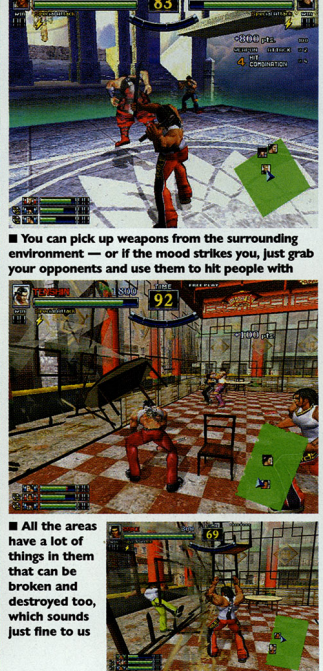
■ Although it's difficult (if not downright impossible) to tell much about the story from a single screenshot, we think it's fair to say the game will be highly dramatic



■ And what would a fantasy game be without a visit to a mysterious temple or two?



→ Alphas



■ You can pick up weapons from the surrounding environment — or if the mood strikes you, just grab your opponents and use them to hit people with

■ All the areas have a lot of things in them that can be broken and destroyed too, which sounds just fine to us

■ ARCADE

SPIKER'S BATTLE

■ Publisher: **Sega** ■ Developer: **Amusement Vision** ■ Release Date: **Spring** ■ Origin: **Japan**

**We love fighting games from Sega.
Did we mention that?**

→ It's been far too long since we've seen a fighting game from Sega, but (as Hannibal Lecter was fond of saying) good things come to those who wait. The developer formerly known as AM4, Amusement Vision, is hard at work on Spiker's Battle, a "pure" fighting game based on the company's own 3D beat-'em-up, the Final Fight-style Spike Out.

The game will run on Sega's current Naomi arcade board, using a control scheme lifted from *Spike Out* — the joystick for movement and four buttons: attack, jump, charge, and camera. The charge button is used to charge up a character to access more powerful special attacks, while the camera button is used (naturally enough) to snap the camera back into position.

The camera button is actually a necessity, since *Spiker's Battle* doesn't constrain itself to the usual side-on perspective seen in most fighting games. Instead, players have a full range of 3D movement, and the perspective is that of a third-person action game — *Tomb Raider*, not *Tekken*. This is accomplished by requiring every player to use his or her own linked cabinet. Up to four people can play at one time, either in four-way brawls or teams, and a small map in the corner of the screen enables you to keep track of other players' positions. Giving players their own units is exactly the way *Spike Out* (and its cousin, *Slash Out*) is played in arcades, but it's a totally new approach for a fighting game. It's also one likely reason why *Spike Out* hasn't been released for any console.



■ Sure, it looks more than a little like *Fighting Vipers*, but it comes by that honestly



■ The backgrounds are all highly detailed, and the action is as hard-hitting as we could ask for — It's good to see a new Sega fighting game, y'know?

If, in looking over the screenshots scattered throughout these pages, you were struck by the thought that *Spiker's Battle* bears no small resemblance to *Fighting Vipers*, you wouldn't be incorrect. Many key people at Amusement Vision did, in fact, work on *Fighting Vipers*



Players have a full range of 3D movement, and the perspective is that of a third-person action game — Tomb Raider, not Tekken.

(and Virtua Fighter before it), so at least the game comes by its similarities honestly. As in *Fighting Vipers*, battles take place within enclosed arenas, and it's possible to slam an opponent right through the walls. In fact, the arenas are all fairly interactive, somewhat in the mold of *Power Stone*, with power-up

items scattered here and there, alongside other objects that can be destroyed or picked up and used as weapons.

Amusement Vision's record in arcades has been solid and impressive, including the much loved *Virtua Striker* series and the current (and

gorgeous) *Planet Harrier*. *Spiker's Battle* is clearly moving the fighting genre into slightly new territory with its multiplayer approach, and it's well in the spirit of what we've come to expect from one of Sega's more talented development houses. At present there's no word on whether we can expect a Dreamcast version, although if *Spike Out* (and, so far, *Slash Out*) are any indication, sadly, there probably won't be one. Still, we can always cross our fingers and hope.

— Jeff Lundrigan/Christophe Kagotani



A few other women will join the impossibly tight-skirted Linda, so it's good to know that *Spiker's Battle* will offer the traditional catfight

WHAT A BUNCH OF CHARACTERS

The original *Spike Out* included only four playable characters: Spike, Tenshin, White, and Linda (and just how Linda manages to fight in such a short, tight skirt remains one of videogaming's true mysteries). This was fine for a *Final Fight*-style beat-'em-up, but naturally it's a little thin for a fighting game. At press time, however, there was little information available about what additional characters would be featured (we only know the names of three: Gorn, Hikaru, and Kitty) or how many there would be in total (other than a vague "many"). Still, given the developer's penchant for odd character designs (we're frankly still scratching our heads over the giant-hypodermic-needle-wielding, flying nurse in *Planet Harrier*), they should at least be an interesting bunch.



Other sorts of items found in each environment include action game staples like health power-ups, introducing an interesting wrinkle into a fighting game

■ Irrational has done a brilliant job of capturing the look and feel of silver age comics

■ PC

FREEDOM FORCE

■ Publisher: **Crave** ■ Developer: **Irrational Games** ■ Release Date: **Q4** ■ Origin: **US (Boston)**

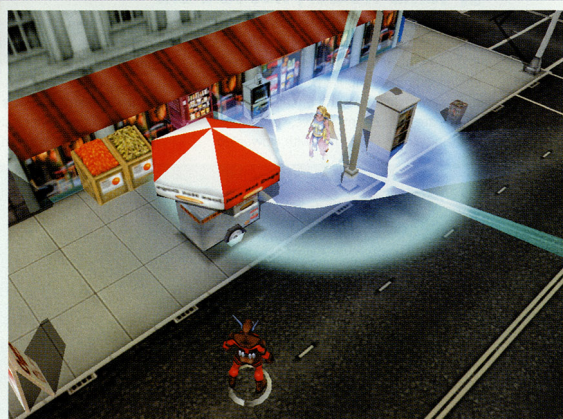
Wham! Pow! Biff! A new superhero game

→ When you think of superhero videogames, you probably imagine popular licensed characters dropped into your typical fighting/platform/beat-'em-up scenario. Noticeably lacking, however, are the dramatic storylines that make you care about what happens to your favorite team, and the epic slugfests where heroes punch villains through walls and save civilians from the brink of disaster. With *Freedom Force*, Boston-based Irrational games is hoping to bring back the magic that makes comics so exciting. With its brightly colored, original heroes, character-

driven plotlines, and wild battles, the game recreates the silver age of comics as accurately as anybody could hope to do after 35 years, and the gameplay is anything but your standard cookie-cutter superhero fare.

"We wanted the game to be tactical in nature," explains Irrational Games General Manager Ken Levine, "where we have a group of superheroes and find out how to use those powers in combination." While the top-down gameplay style may look familiar to the realtime strategy crowd, it differs in that instead of hundreds of similar units on screen, there is now a much smaller number of very complex units at the same time. Players can choose a team of four heroes (from a roster that grows throughout the game) for each mission. They are then plunked down into fully 3D city landscapes complete with plenty of bad guys and disasters — one level we were shown had New York being invaded by giant ants.

The strategy element, however, almost seems secondary to the team's goal of fully



■ If the characters provided with the game aren't enough, you can create your own

realizing the superhero experience. Levine really wants to give players, in his words, "giant battles where people beat the crap out of each other in cities — they whack each other through skyscrapers, and they do all that crazy stuff." With this in mind, the team has created a world where everything imaginable can be





WITH GREAT POWER...

When creating your own superhero mythos, one of the most important details is the hero's origin story. Irrational hasn't skimped at all in this detail, and heroes in the game have their own movies (which are unlocked throughout the game) describing how they came to be and why they fight crime. Like many of the original Stan Lee creations of the '60s, however, these characters aren't just idealized caricatures — they're imperfect people who have been shouldered with the enormous responsibility of having superpowers. Some, as you may guess, deal with this better than others, but each has a unique view of the world and followed a very interesting path to get where they are on the Freedom Force. While the movies may make you chuckle (the '60s feels has been nailed perfectly), we'll bet that you'll actually care about these characters by the time they're done — and that's how legends get started.

manipulated or destroyed. Standing near a lightpole? Click on it, and your super-strong character will rip it out of the ground and swing it at a bad guy. If you see a car nearby, there's nothing to stop you from grabbing it and throwing it at the nearest enemy — and, if you miss, it may destroy the storefront behind him. In a world of superpowers, anything goes, and it's up to the player to take advantage not only of each character's inherent strengths, but the environs as well.

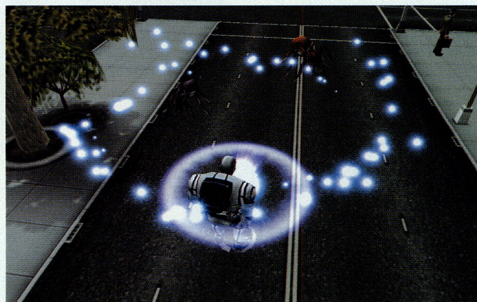
While there are dozens of cleverly designed characters to play, one thing that will undeniably attract fans is the custom editor that enables you to create your own heroes and place them into the game. "Our character-building system is very comprehensive," points out Levine. "The

characters are a composite of their powers, and when building characters, players can mix and match." Still, don't expect to create an unbeatable hero — superheroes will also have flaws, weaknesses, and even sidekicks to balance things out. "Sidekicks are useful," explains Levine, "but they're also a liability. Heroes will drop what they're doing and help their sidekick if he's in trouble."

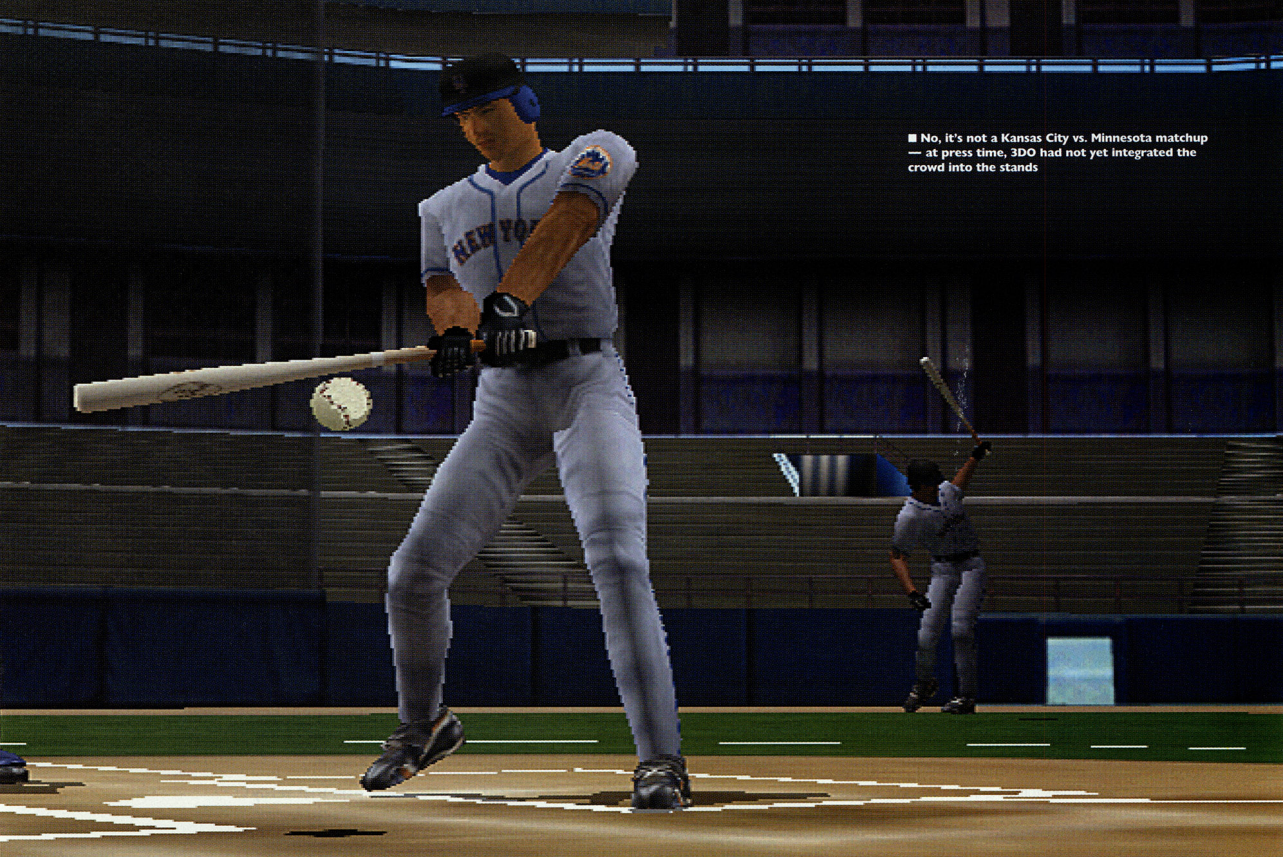
Will *Freedom Force* be the first game to truly deliver on the superhero promise? It's still a ways out, but it looks like the team knows what it needs to do to bring it all together. If Irrational can meet its ambitious goals, it may pull off something of a superhuman coup and make a worthy game without the star power of Marvel or DC comics.

— Blake Fischer

■ Every character has his or her own set of superpowers and weaknesses. Some have the ability to shoot power beams, while others must rely on their super-strength to manipulate the environment



■ The physics engine in *Freedom Force* enables everything in the environment to be destroyed or manipulated — even the buildings!



■ No, it's not a Kansas City vs. Minnesota matchup — at press time, 3DO had not yet integrated the crowd into the stands

■ PLAYSTATION 2

HIGH HEAT MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL 2002

■ Publisher: 3DO ■ Developer: 3DO ■ Release Date: March ■ Origin: US

The crack of the bat, the roar of the crowd — baseball comes to PS2

➔ The majesty of Fenway Park, a perfectly executed 6-4-3 double play, overpriced hotdogs... Add these together and you get baseball, our national pastime. But baseball is also about countless throws to first, warming up between innings, and three-hour games. In making a baseball game, especially a console baseball game, where do you find that magic balance between simulation and action that'll

make it fun? That's the big question for 3DO, which is bringing its popular PC baseball series to PlayStation 2.

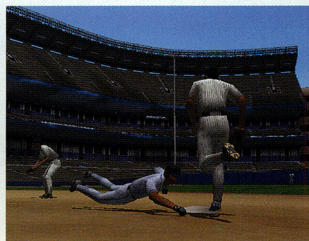
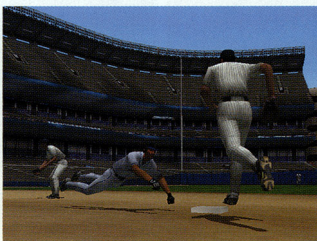
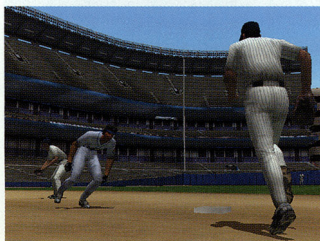
"We have a model that is second to none in turning statistics into real life," declares 3DO Senior Producer James Coliz, Jr. "We have about 2.4 million stats that we use to determine the probability that you'll connect with a specific pitch on a specific day to have a specific

outcome. Our players act and react like the real guys do."

So you won't find Randy Johnson cranking out 40 homers in a game; he'll hit like, well, a pitcher. You will, however, find AI outfielders that shift to the right when facing a left-handed batter; Nomar Garciaparra's signature batting stance; and Vladimir Guerrero gunning out baserunners from deep in right field.

CARRY A BIG STICK?

Swinging a heavy bat will make you the next Mark McGwire, right? Well, not quite. The distance of a hit ball is a function of its momentum off the bat, and because momentum = mass X velocity, increasing your bat's weight will give you more pop only if you keep your bat speed the same or higher. Lugging a 42-ounce monster like Babe Ruth's bat can not only throw out your shoulder but slow your swing enough to negate all benefits of a bigger stick. To learn more about this and other ways to understand baseball through science, check out Robert Adair's book *The Physics of Baseball*.





■ Active base coaches signal whether to round third, hold up, or hit the dirt

3DO has focused on pacing to make its baseball game fun for the console gamer. A full 9-inning game can be played in about half an hour by eliminating unnecessary interruptions in the action, such as catchers throwing balls back to the pitchers. But a streamlined game is nothing without a lot of "wow" factor, and this one promises a ton. "Baseball fans will like the simulation of real life, but the reward for gamers comes in showcasing the power of the PS2 with over 1,300 stunning animations," says Vice President of Product Development Nicholas



■ Players can control the destiny of their runners: Take a chance on a fly ball, or stay close to the bag to tag up

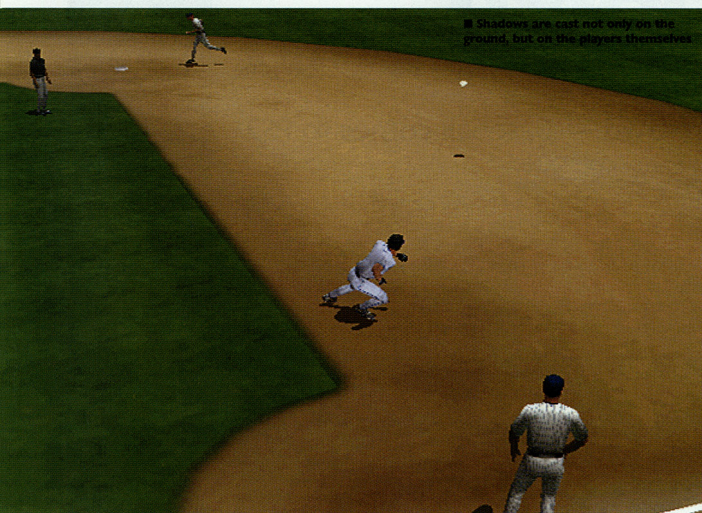
Beliaeff. "High Heat turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. Instead of fielding a routine grounder, a shortstop can make a diving catch and fire a throw to first."

The AI in the game also mimics human error. There are passed balls, wild pitches, and overthrown balls. It makes mistakes, allowing you to draw walks when at bat or striking out by swinging at balls out of the strike zone, and it can even get nailed for trying to stretch a double into a triple. "In any game, you look for long-term play value, and *High Heat* has it," adds

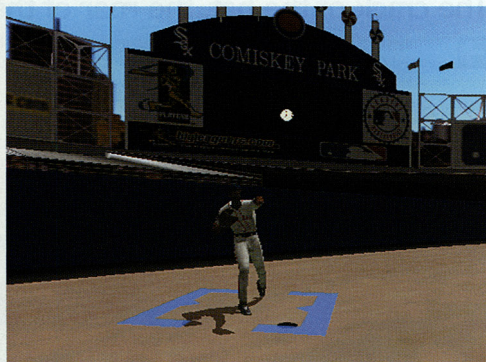
Producer Karlo Kilayko, "just like in a real baseball game, [when playing *High Heat*] you can always see something you've never seen before."

High Heat will offer curve balls that really curve and hit balls that curl outside the foul line.

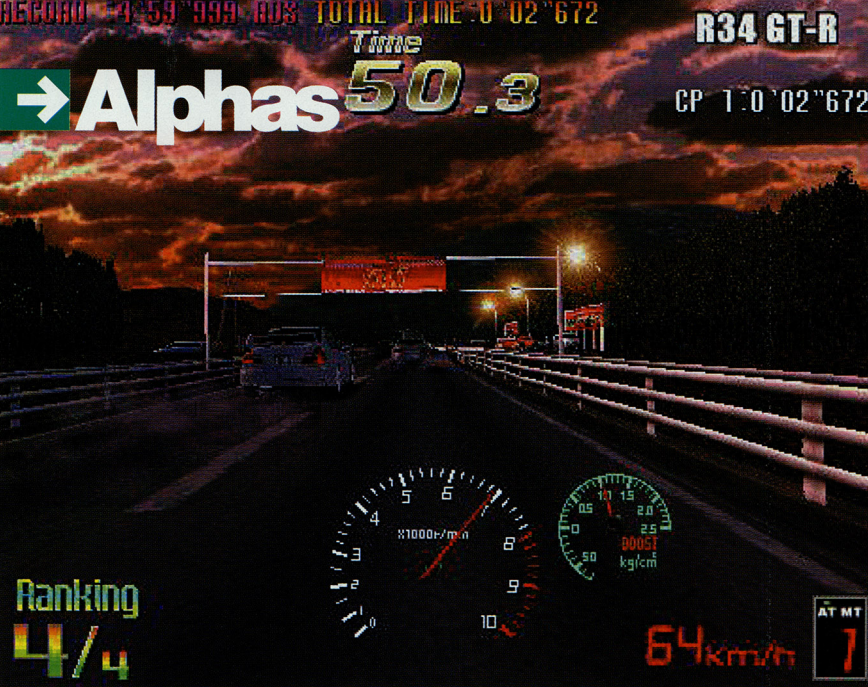
The thin air in Colorado makes Coors Field a hitters' park just like in real life, due to the lower density air allowing hit balls to carry further and breaking pitches to break less. Crowds get rowdier as the home team bats in the bottom of the ninth inning and disperse during blowouts (so don't expect a packed house at Dodger Stadium after the seventh inning). If 3DO stays true to its commitment to simple fun to balance the game's realism, *High Heat Major League Baseball 2002* may open the franchise up to a new audience of gamers. — Kevin Toyama



■ Shadows are cast not only on the ground, but on the players themselves



■ 3DO prides itself not only on the accuracy of its rosters, but its attention to detail when recreating the parks



■ At the very least, this boasts some nice lighting and environmental effects — we've rarely seen such a pretty sunrise in a game

■ PLAYSTATION 2

BATTLE GEAR 2

■ Publisher: **Taito (Japan)** ■ Developer: **Taito** ■ Release Date: **March (Japan)** ■ Origin: **Japan**

No, it's not a mech sim

➔ When the original *Battle Gear* was released to arcades in 1998, it sported solid racing mechanics and a fine selection of cars, but the graphics were never really up-to-snuff. When the sequel followed last year, it corrected that problem, and *Battle Gear 2* looked quite nice as it graced Japanese arcades, breathing new life into Taito's racing series. So here we are almost a year later, and the game is soon to be released for PlayStation 2, with

almost all of its visual glory intact.

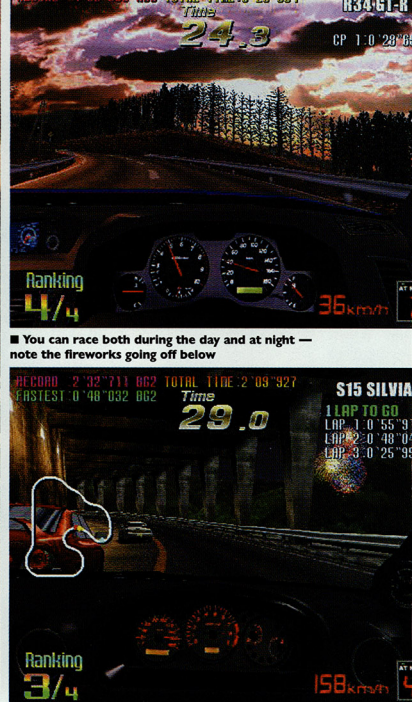
The game will also keep its serviceable, if somewhat small, roster of GT cars, a total of 30 from Toyota, Nissan, Honda, Mitsubishi, Mazda, and Subaru. The game offers a number of racing modes, including Normal mode, racing against three other real cars, and a Time Attack mode against a ghost car representing your best time on a given track. You can also choose from the usual in-car and exterior views, and if these options don't sound incredibly exciting, the cars do handle quite well.

Indeed, most of the tracks boast a nice,

sinuous design that shows off the relatively

responsive steering in the arcade version. Hopefully the PlayStation 2 version will handle every bit as smoothly. The only major knock we can make from having looked it over is a distinct lack of anti-aliasing — the game does, however, feature a lot of sweet-looking lighting and environmental effects.

With the exception of *GT3*, *Battle Gear 2* looks like many other PS2 racers we've seen so far. That may be enough to get U.S. publishers interested, although the name would likely change. — Jeff Lundrigan/Christophe Kagotani



■ You can race both during the day and at night — note the fireworks going off below

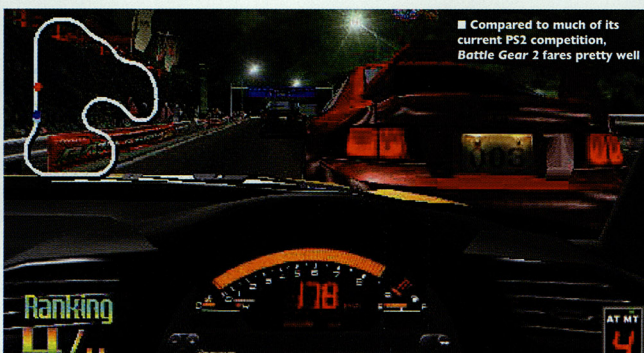


WHO THINKS THESE UP?

Battle Gear is an odd name for a racing game, and would seem more suited to a mech sim or something similar. It actually makes an odd sense — a race can be seen as a battle, so you spend the time shifting into "battle gear" — although such thinking is somewhat convoluted. However, Japanese game designers seem to use the word "gear" almost at random, intending lots of different (and sometimes completely incoherent) meanings: *Guilty Gear*, *Xenogears*, *Steampunk Mash*, and of course, *Metal Gear Solid*, arguably the most obscure title for a popular game ever, in which "gear" refers to a kind of mech. Can anyone explain this?

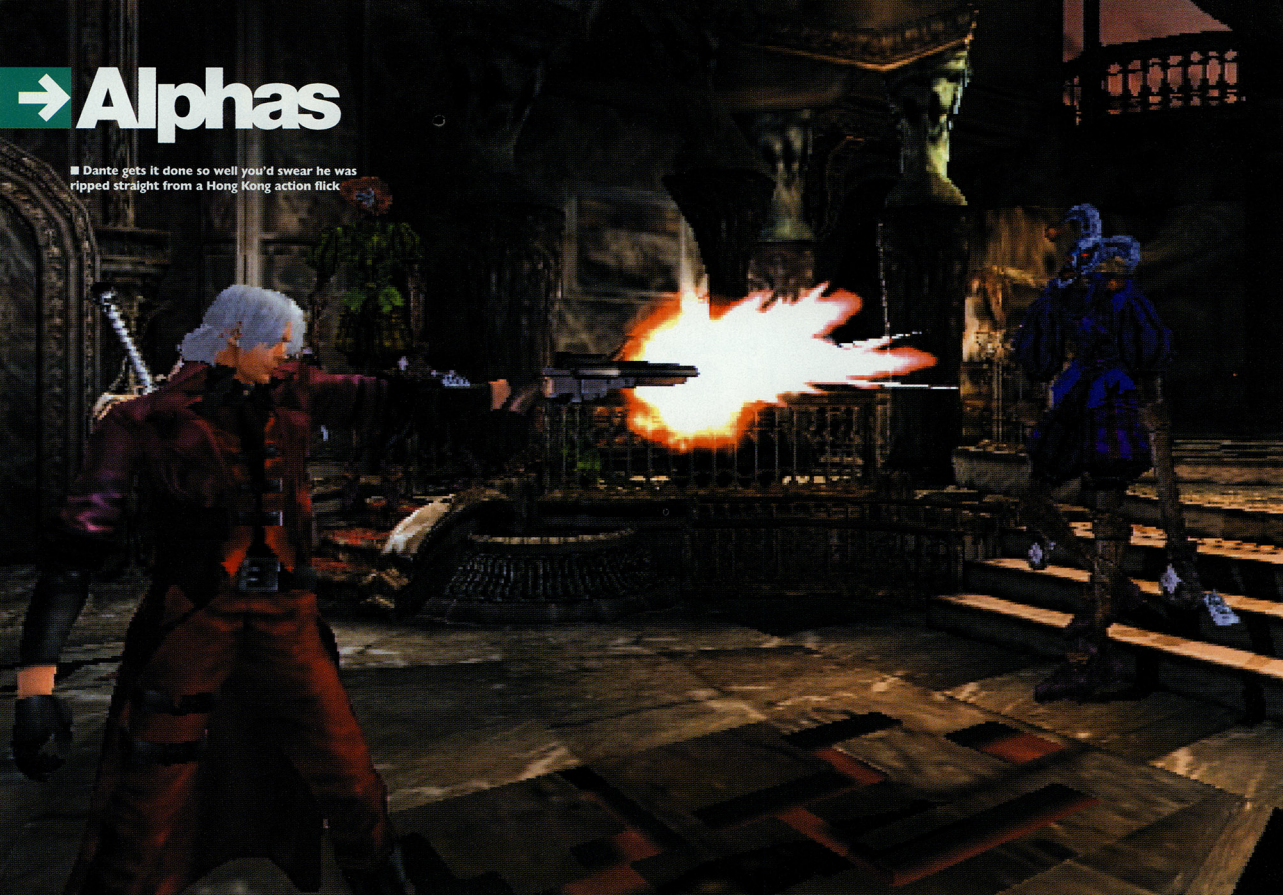


■ The roster of cars doesn't measure up to that of, say, a *GT3*, but it's more than inclusive enough



■ Compared to much of its current PS2 competition, *Battle Gear 2* fares pretty well

■ Dante gets it done so well you'd swear he was ripped straight from a Hong Kong action flick



■ The realtime environments of DMC enable subtle camera work that helps track Dante in action



■ PLAYSTATION 2

DEVIL MAY CRY

■ Publisher: **Capcom** ■ Developer: **Capcom** ■ Release Date: **Fall** ■ Origin: **Japan**

The team behind *Resident Evil 2* is back, and all they want is to do is kick ass

➡ The man behind Capcom's survival horror franchises, Shinji Mikami, is synonymous in the gaming industry for zombies, dinosaurs, and other horrors, so it's not too surprising to see that he's plumbing the depths of hell for the antagonists of his newest PlayStation 2 game, *Devil May Cry*. And while the game reunites him with *Resident Evil 2* director Hideki Kamiya, it's a surprising departure from their last collaboration.

This time around you play a bad-ass, gun-toting swordsman named Dante who is out to rid the world of the demons that have returned after 2000 years of banishment. In typical Mikami fashion, few story details have leaked out, but we do know that Dante is a descendant of the man who banished these

demons in the first place and is even part demon himself. In the early version of the game we were able to sit down and play, there didn't seem to be any story elements at all, cut scenes or otherwise, so it's still unknown how much of





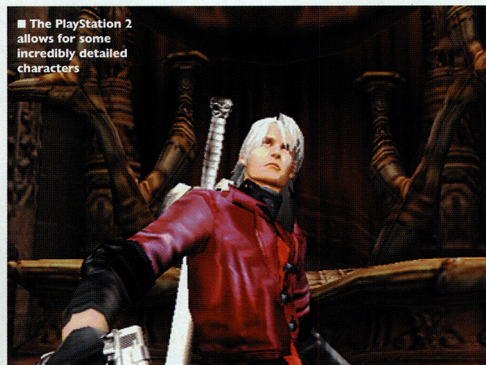
■ Many characters will occasionally crowd onto the screen, yet the game still stays at 60fps

a factor the actual storytelling will be.

The gameplay is almost a hint that the story will be less of a factor than in Mikami's previous games, since at this point it's almost pure action. Unlike *RE2*'s Claire Redfield, Dante is well equipped to deal with whatever gets in his way, and ammo doesn't seem like much of an issue. In fact, the first "puzzle" in the demo involved killing 30 monsters and gathering their souls to open a door. So after you proceed up the staircase and climb up the wall — Dante

can double-jump off of vertical surfaces — you'll confront your first baddie: a strange marionette-type demon that wields curved blades, which can be flung across the room *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*-style. Take him out using your sword (triangle button) and your dual pistols (like in *RE*, hold R1 then rapidly push square or circle — you'll auto aim), then gather up the icon he leaves behind. Then you need to work your way around the level and kill 29 more. Luckily, movement has been made much easier; the team has ditched the *RE* style

This time around you play a bad-ass gun-toting swordsman named Dante.



■ The PlayStation 2 allows for some incredibly detailed characters

of relative controls, choosing instead to make Dante move in whatever direction you're pressing the analog stick. The camera still retains some of the *RE* legacy, however, since it features some fixed angles with the added ability to pan and follow Dante around. It resembles the *Code: Veronica* engine in many respects, but the graphics are much more detailed than in the previous title.

While the fighting doesn't seem to be as complex as in *Onimusha*, there's still quite a bit of technique. Which way you're holding the analog stick, for example, will determine Dante's swing, and each of the elementally based swords — there were two in the demo but reportedly four in the final game — enables a different attack move when equipped. You can even use both Dante's sword and guns in tandem, since switching between them takes very little to no time. One of the cooler moves we discovered in our playtest was knocking a demon up in the air with an underhand swing



■ This giant bird boss (above) makes a roaring entrance oddly reminiscent of *Metal Gear Rex* from *Metal Gear Solid*

→ Alphas

■ The otherworldly horrors you fight in *Devil May Cry* come straight from the pits of hell and range from disturbing to downright bizarre



Dante is well equipped to deal with whatever gets in his way, and ammo doesn't seem like much of an issue.

of the sword, then blasting him repeatedly before he lands with the guns. It's actually very fluid, and when you combine it with destructible environments (racks of weapons lining the walls shattered as we fought) and several enemies attacking at once, the game feels eerily similar to a gothic Hong Kong action flick. And don't forget that Dante has demon blood in him, so when his spiritual power bar at the top is filled (by killing enemies, of course), he can transform into his half-demon form and wreak more havoc with some enhanced attacks.

Our very early look at the game left us

impressed. The graphics are incredibly crisp, and the level of detail is astounding. Things like the shotgun shell casings and feathers that fall off a huge bird boss are all a testament to the loving care Kamiya and Mikami are putting into this game. Even the music, which changes dynamically from moody ambience when

exploring to driving guitar for combat, is already awesome, adding just the right touches to the exciting gaming environment. Our only worry at this point is that there may not be much in the way of puzzles — the most complicated one in our demo involved hitting a wall to light up a symbol. Still, it is too early to tell whether this is a definite indication of things to come, and this may be entirely irrelevant when the team has all the level designs laid out and properly balanced. We can't wait to find out. — Blake Fischer



■ The in-game soundtrack will change depending on what type of situation you're in. For exploration, it's just soft ambience, but when you start to fight the driving beats and guitar riffs kick in



■ When he gathers enough power, Dante can turn into his alternate demon form

THAT'S JUST GOOFY!



Much like action film director John Woo, who got his start directing comedies, Shinji Mikami started off his career at Capcom working on titles that are radically different from the horror and action titles he's known for today. In fact, his first titles included the lighthearted Disney romp *Aladdin* and *Goof Troop* for the SNES. *Goof Troop*? Oh, the horror!

→ Milestones



■ The first level climaxes with Sonic running for his life from a giant semi with very little respect for the rules of the road



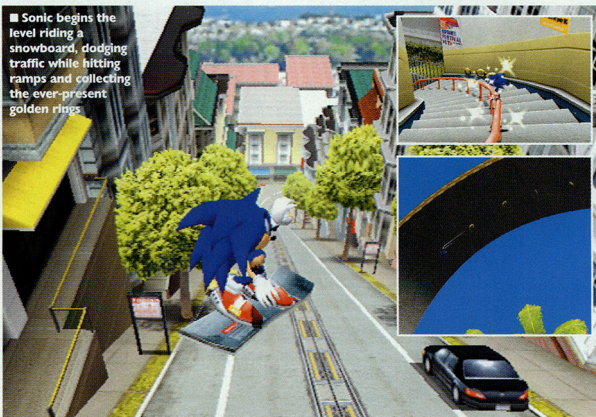
■ DREAMCAST

SONIC ADVENTURE 2

■ Publisher: Sega ■ Developer: Sega ■ Release Date: Q3

→ Sega's original ambassador of attitude returns, with special shoes that enable him to grind *Tony Hawk*-style through many of the game's stages. Additional new moves include riding a snowboard, grabbing ledges just like Lara, and utilizing a new somersault move to crush boxes and squeeze through small openings. We previewed SA2 two months ago, and now we've played the first level, which blazes through a hilly, San Francisco-inspired cityscape perfect for grinding and boarding. Though the game's antagonists — a mysterious black hedgehog and an evil corporation known as G.U.N. — remain shrouded in secrecy, the gameplay is solid, and Sonic's trademark speed remains.

■ Sonic begins the level riding a snowboard, dodging traffic while hitting ramps and collecting the ever-present golden rings.

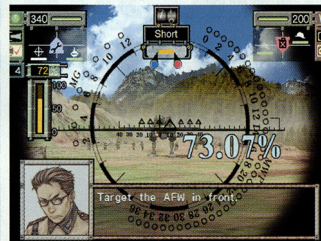


■ These images from the game's trailer offer a tantalizing glimpse of gameplay to come: Eggman is firepower incarnate; Knuckles is on board; and there's plenty of grinding. Now, what's the deal with that black hedgehog?



■ If you don't mind taking a little damage as you close the gap, you can attack from close range, with devastating effects

■ The longer you have the enemy in your sights (below), the better your odds of connecting with your attack. Of course, you remain vulnerable as well



■ PLAYSTATION 2

RING OF RED

■ Publisher: Konami ■ Developer: Konami
■ Release Date: March

➔ We've played a demo of Konami's mech strategy RPG (first previewed in **NG 10/00**), and its combination of an immersive alternate timeline with great graphics with awesome mech designs really held our attention. There is a definite limitation in that only a small number of units that can battle at any given time. However, the tradeoff is that those conflicts play out in dynamic realtime while still retaining much of the strategic depth typically reserved for turn-based combat.



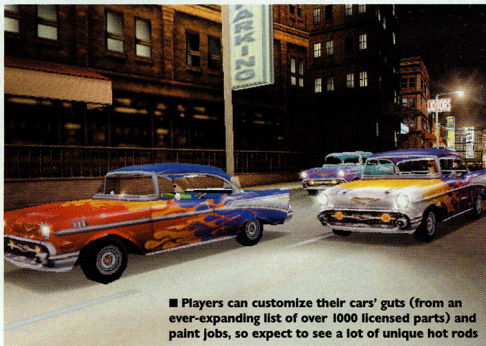
■ Only two mechs can battle at a time, although human units are often part of the equation

■ PC

MOTOR CITY ONLINE

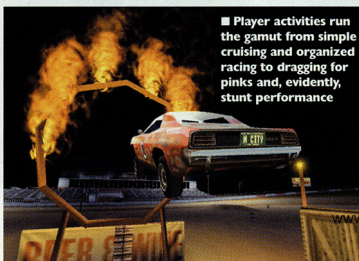
■ Publisher: EA ■ Developer: EA ■ Release Date: Summer

➔ Though it's a bit behind the curve graphically (no surprise — it's been in development for a while and was previewed in our 10/99 issue), EA's massively multiplayer foray into hot rod heaven may be a gearhead's dream come true. Every piece of your car can be modified, from the paint to the plugs, and there is a realistic in-game economy ruled by the laws of supply and demand. It's even possible to win another player's car in a pink slip race and auction off the individual parts.



■ Players can customize their cars' guts (from an ever-expanding list of over 1000 licensed parts) and paint jobs, so expect to see a lot of unique hot rods

■ Available cars will range from the '30s to the '70s, but it's a simple fact that the world looks better from behind the wheel of a '57 Chevy



■ Player activities run the gamut from simple cruising and organized racing to dragging for pinks and, evidently, stunt performance





■ The move to 3D hasn't hindered the game's appearance at all. Environments look impeccable, whether urban, tropical, or arctic

■ PC, DREAMCAST, PLAYSTATION 2

COMMANDOS 2

■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Developer: Pyro Studios ■ Release Date: March (all platforms)



■ The tank is an incredible instrument of destruction. In multiplayer, one player pilots the vehicle while another does out the death



■ Among the new abilities are swimming, moving hand-over-hand along wires, and peeking in windows, which is crucial if you want to slip into a building undetected



→ Pyro's squad-level, WWII-based RTS series is much improved with this sequel, which leaps into full 3D with beautiful results. In addition to the greatly improved graphics, the action is much deeper, thanks to new units and abilities. For instance, there's a dog that can deliver munitions, and snipers can be positioned inside a building to fire upon targets visible through the window of another building.

■ PLAYSTATION 2

SHADOW OF DESTINY

■ Publisher: Konami ■ Developer: Konami

■ Release Date: March

→ We continue to be intrigued by this unusual adventure whodunit, in which the player must continually travel forward and back through time to circumvent his repeated murder and discover who is behind it (see **Alphas**, **NG 08/00**). There are reportedly over three hours of cinematics, so we're wondering just how much of the game is actual interaction versus watching cut scenes. On the other hand, it could also signal that the game contains a compelling, well-told story, and that's worth a lot.

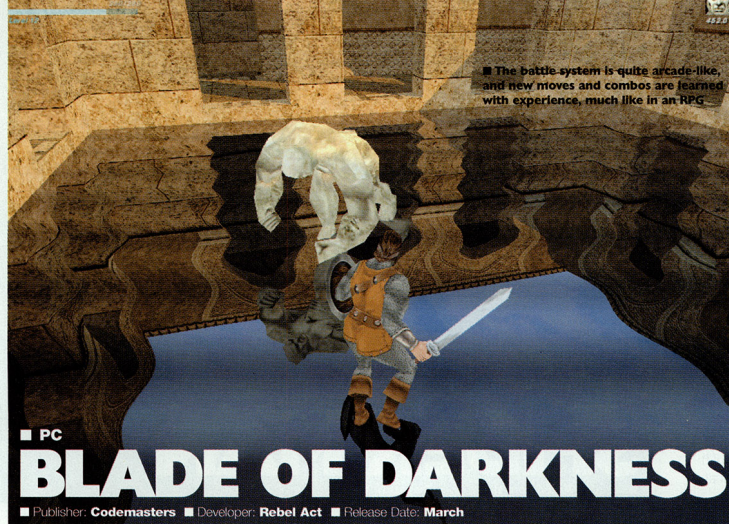


■ The game is literally packed with cinematics, which look to introduce a number of unusual characters



■ The effects of your actions, of course, ripple through time





■ The battle system is quite arcade-like, and new moves and combos are learned with experience, much like in an RPG

■ PC

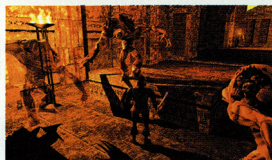
BLADE OF DARKNESS

■ Publisher: **Codemasters** ■ Developer: **Rebel Act** ■ Release Date: **March**



■ The dynamic lighting is uncannily effective. You can also use this torch to set flammable objects alight

→ Similar to a souped-up version of *Draconus* or *Rune*, this PC hack-and-slasher combines a very console-esque combat control scheme with staggeringly immersive visual and aural detail. Run through one torchlit room while carrying another torch, and the shadows warp perfectly. Listen closely to an enemy from around the corner, and you can actually guess how well armored he is from the sounds his attire is making.



■ It's not unusual to be set upon by several enemies at once

■ PLAYSTATION 2

ARMY MEN: GREEN ROGUE

■ Publisher: **3DO** ■ Developer: **3DO** ■ Release Date: **March**

→ 3DO's little plastic engineers of destruction move into arcade territory with this game, which actually takes its cue from classic scrolling shooters. It replaces *Ikari Warriors'* free-roaming action with a forced upward scroll, and the main character moves rather slowly, making dodging difficult, but there remains potential here. Tributes to classic shooter ideals include giant boss characters, 16 themed environments (beach, jungle, snowy forest, etc.) and a two-player cooperative mode.



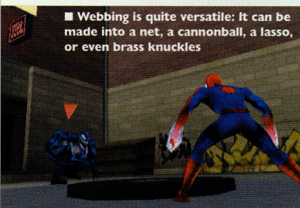
■ As all shooters should, this game includes a two-player cooperative mode



■ There are several weapons to choose from, ranging from typical bazookas and grenades to the beautifully realized flamethrower



→ Milestones



■ Webbing is quite versatile: It can be made into a net, a cannonball, a lasso, or even brass knuckles



→ The wall-crawler's excellent PlayStation adventure comes to Dreamcast, complete with several enhancements. Spidey has articulated fingers now, and the webbing is being redesigned to look more realistic. There are also numerous cameo appearances by such Marvel luminaries as the Fantastic Four, who appeared in the original version only after the game had been beaten.



■ This game really captures the feel of what it must be like to be Spider-Man. Plus, it's in high res now

■ DREAMCAST

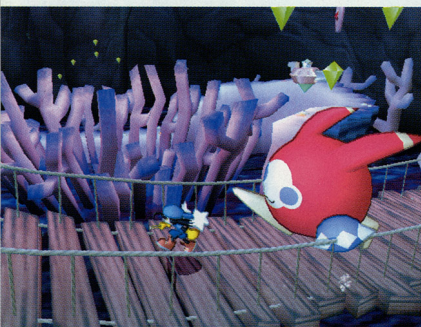
SPIDER-MAN

■ Publisher: Activision ■ Developer: Treyarch ■ Release Date: Q2

■ PLAYSTATION 2

KLONOA 2: LUNATEA'S VEIL

■ Publisher: Namco ■ Developer: Namco ■ Release Date: April



■ As is often the case in platform games, your enemies' cutesy appearances belie their deadly intentions



■ Like Sonic, Klonoa takes a turn on the snowboard this time around

→ We took our first look at this platformer back in **NG 12/00**, and now we've had the chance to play it. While it uses many next-generation techniques (cel-shading, 3D environments), the action is purely old-school. Klonoa typically runs and jumps along a 2D plane, first ensnaring, then throwing enemies. There are some new gameplay vectors too, including a run through hostile territory on a snowboard.

■ PC

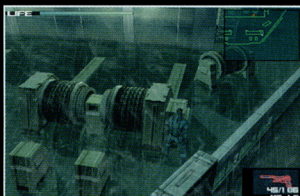
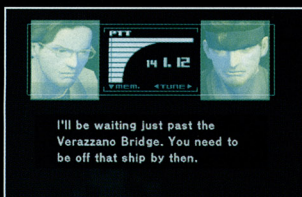
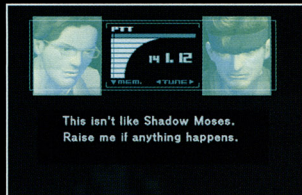
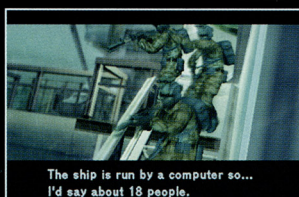
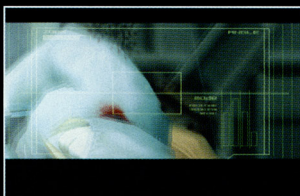
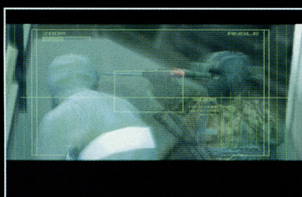
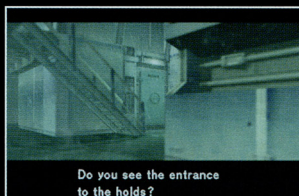
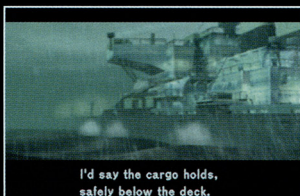
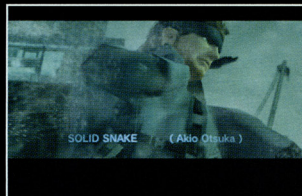
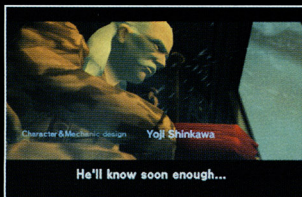
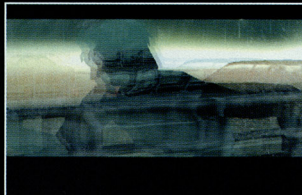
STARTOPIA

■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Developer: Mucky Foot ■ Release Date: April

→ The city simulation moves deftly into Deep Space Nine territory with this title, which features nine alien races, each with unique habits and requirements. In addition to keeping them happy, you must utilize sound economic strategy and military force to fend off rival stationmasters. Head-to-head online play — rare to the "city" building genre — will be capable of supporting four simultaneous competitors.

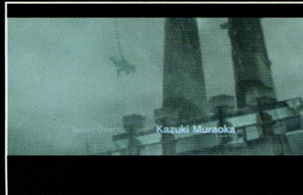


■ The space station interiors run the gamut from typical pipes and steel to more exotic, environmentally-themed locales (near left)

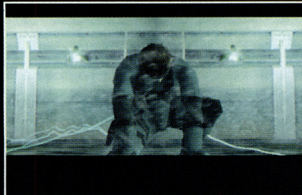




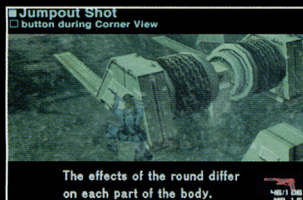
Director of Motion design: So Toyota



Kazuki Murasaka



Our boy is right on schedule.

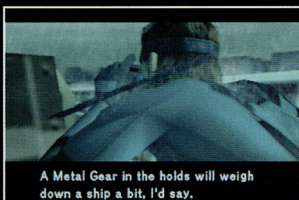


Jumpout Shot button during Corner View

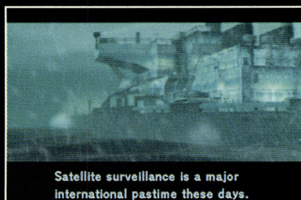
The effects of the round differ on each part of the body.



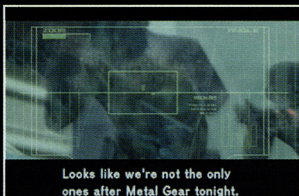
Hey, Earth to Snake.



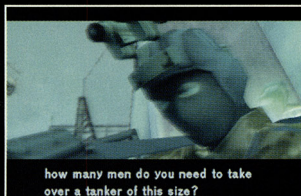
A Metal Gear in the holds will weigh down a ship a bit, I'd say.



Satellite surveillance is a major international pastime these days.



Looks like we're not the only ones after Metal Gear tonight.



how many men do you need to take over a tanker of this size?



Looks like the tanker's theirs now.



■ When it's released, there's no question *Metal Gear Solid 2* will be the most cinematic videogame ever made. These screenshots (running in order, left to right across both pages) capture the game's fantastic opening moments

■ PlayStation 2

METAL GEAR SOLID 2: THE SONS OF LIBERTY

■ Publisher: Konami ■ Developer: Konami ■ Release Date: Fall ■ Origin: Japan

In Konami's brave new world, this game plays as great as it looks

Waiting is a chore. But wait long enough for something you expect will be truly wonderful, and just before it happens, you will be greeted by that incredibly warm feeling of heightened antici-

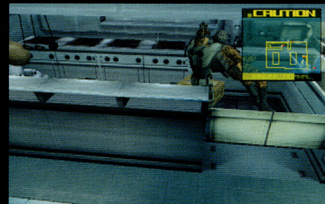
pation. Waiting to play *Metal Gear Solid 2* in a Konami meeting room, **Next Generation** experienced this elusive, primordial adrenaline rush so commonplace in the Christmas mornings of our youths.

After waiting a year to put a playable *Metal Gear Solid 2* disc in the tray of a PS2, we started it up and played. When the game demo ended, we left Konami contented in the knowledge that the world of videogames is

→ Cover Story



■ Whether he's in the box (top) or snapping necks (below), Snake's movement is incredibly natural



The controls and gameplay will be familiar to anyone who played Metal Gear Solid

progressing at an incredible pace. Some games actually still live up to the hype. Anyone who's waiting for the PS2 demo disc of *Metal Gear Solid 2* (shipping this spring with *Zone of the Enders*) should feel the same way we did — the same anticipation before the demo, and the same satisfaction afterward.

In the Beginning

The demo disc opens at the very beginning of the game, so players will actually get to check out the entire opening movie. Anyone foolish enough to skip through the intro movie (roughly eight minutes) will not only miss Snake's dramatic entrance onto the container ship on which the game is set, but a very important plot point. In a nutshell, Snake, working with Otacon via a transmitter, has boarded a ship carrying another Metal Gear in development. Snake's mission is

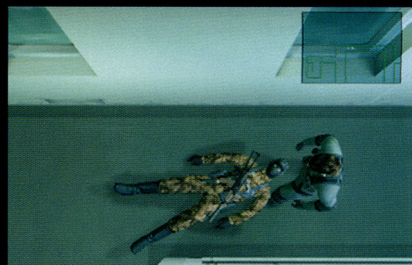
supposed to be limited to information gathering for a United Nations anti-Metal Gear task force. The ship is being covertly operated by U.S. Marines — until, that is, it is taken by a group of Russian terrorists led by (you guessed it) Ocelot, the bad guy formerly known as Revolver Ocelot.

We know your *Die Hard*/*Under Siege*



■ The soldier on the stairs is sleeping (note the Zs). But it's the big sleep for the guy on the right — no Zs

alarm is ringing wildly, but from the opening moments of the game it's obvious the movie influence isn't subtle. The front-end credits appear just as they would in an action movie — the names fit perfectly into the appropriate holes left by the artsy cine-



REQUISITE BRIEFING:

The History of the Metal Gear Series

Whether or not you've known it, Snake has been around since 1987. The technology sure has changed since then, but the gameplay and plot premises haven't strayed too far.



Metal Gear

Platform: MSX
Release: 1987 (Japan Only)

Metal Gear was the first project Kojima Productions developed for Konami. In it, players assumed the role of Solid Snake and had to infiltrate the country of Outer Heaven and destroy Metal Gear — a weapon of ultimate destruction created by global terrorist Colonel Vernon Calaff. The "hide and sneak" action was presented in 2D, from a top-down perspective.



Metal Gear

Platform: NES
Release: 1988

Kojima and his team had nothing to do with this port, which featured improved graphics and a different level layout from the MSX version. Despite the switch in developers, feedback from the MSX version made for an even better NES game. Subsequently, *Metal Gear* met with favorable sales when it was released in the U.S. under the short-lived Ultra Games label.



■ Take a look off the ship and you'll see the New York skyline (above left). You can also dump bodies overboard (above right)

because after the long cinema, you realize you are finally in control of the character. The transition is seamless, as the environment is just as real-looking as it appeared when you were simply watching. The controls and gameplay will be familiar to anyone who has played *Metal Gear Solid*. As you'd expect, Snake moves through the use of analog stick, walking or running based on how much pressure you apply. Snake's inventory system is also nearly identical to the one in *Metal Gear Solid*. In fact as you begin moving through the environment, you'll find many of the same things that



matographer. The music sets a pensive mood straight out of Jerry Bruckheimer's action-epic recipe book as we are treated to a beautifully rendered George Washington Bridge set against dreary New York weather, complete with the blurring lights of passing cars. The camera pans to a solitary figure in a rain slicker walking alone, who is seemingly neither enjoying nor thinking about the rain — behold Snake.

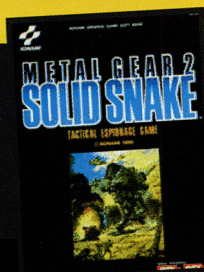
Writer/Director/*Metal Gear* franchise creator Hideo Kojima presents us with one of the longest opening movies of a game that we've ever seen — but it is so engrossing, and so well put-together, it hardly matters. In the version shown to **Next Generation**, the voicework was all in Japanese with English subtitles. According to Ken Ogasawara, Konami's U.S. liaison on *Metal Gear*, there was talk of using some high-profile actors for the English voices, but the costs to secure that talent was rather ridiculous. Based on hints from Kojima himself, we estimate the game's development costs alone will run between \$10 and \$12 million. Ogasawara tells us the plan for the English voice work is to get back many of the same people responsible for the voices in the first PlayStation game.

And the Game Plays

The drama and dialogue eventually give way to the actual game. It's an odd start,



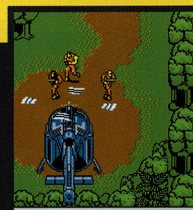
■ The opening stage involves tranquilizing guards, dragging them, and sometimes (like a high school bully) stuffing them into lockers



Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake

Platform: MSX

Kojima returned to the series, serving up a (then) graphically intense sequel that served as the final hurrah for an aging MSX. The game was set in the late '90s, with Snake's job to rescue an important scientist who has been kidnapped by a hostile Zanzibar government with the goal of nuclear proliferation. Characters in the game resembled Hollywood actors, and the 2D game engine was significantly improved to enable more complex missions.

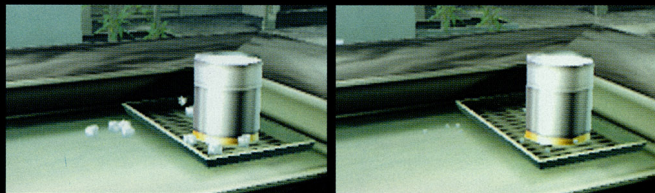


SNAKE'S REVENGE

Platform: NES
Release Date: 1990

Like the first NES version, this port had nothing to do with Kojima. This time the game lacked the scope of the MSX version, and favored action gameplay over the intrigue of stealth mechanics. The franchise then lay dormant until Kojima and his team returned to it in 1995.

→ Cover Story



■ There may be more interesting things to do, but you can literally stand around and watch the ice melt (above). Shoot a glass bottle (right) and it will break in realistic fashion

came in handy during *Metal Gear Solid*, such as weapons, ammo, bandages, rations, chaff grenades, and stun grenades.

Of course, it wouldn't be *Metal Gear* without radar to guide you. This time, players are given the choice between two types, as well as the option to use none at all. In the original Radar mode, the radar switches off for a period of time, if you've been detected.

While stealth movement and combat work much as they did in *Metal Gear Solid*, Snake has an incredible number of new

moves. He can hold up terrorist soldiers, take them hostage, shoot them, drag their bodies, shake them for useful items, and stuff them into hiding spots in an incredibly realistic manner. Perhaps the biggest addition to the combat, though, is the ability to shoot in first-person mode. Although you can't move while you are shooting, the player is given very accurate control over aiming, not unlike sniping in *GoldenEye*. Several combat moves have to do with the higher level of interactivity players will enjoy within the



Metal Gear Solid 2 universe. For example, Snake can now shoot pipes, which may emit steam and burn enemies.

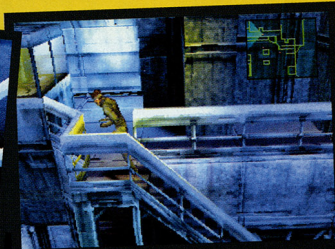
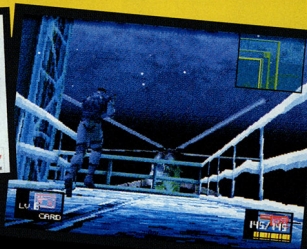
Know Your Environment

MGS2 really pushes the envelope in terms of environmental realism. At first, the most obvious effect is the rain. Once players take control of Snake, they'll notice it still comes down on him in an incredibly lifelike fashion. The wind kicks up and blows the rain, and the tails of Snake's headband are physically modeled to move with perfect realism — they flutter in the breeze and change direction as Snake moves his head.

"In such a real-looking environment in an action game," says Kojima, "we expect players to want to interact with all objects. We tried to do our best to accommodate such desires by making a lot of the objects interactive. Doing so requires simulations based on the laws of physics, and our



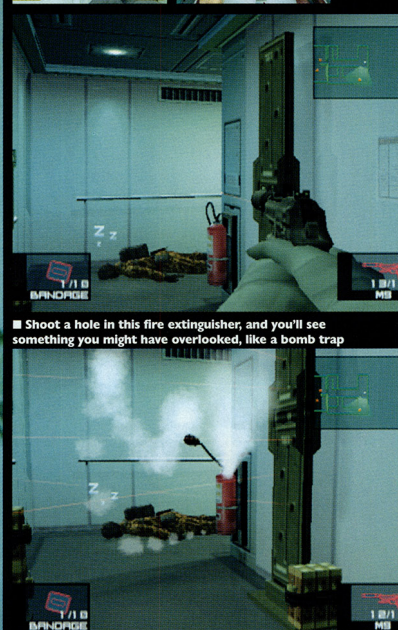
■ Stick 'em up! Shaking down enemies won't get you information, but they will cough up items you'll use



Metal Gear Solid

Platform: PlayStation
Release Date: 1998

Kojima took PlayStation by storm with the first 3D *Metal Gear* game. The tremendously received stealth gameplay was supported by superb realtime 3D environments, cool characters, and professional voiceover. The game was also one of the first to use the in-game engine for highly cinematic cut scenes. Snake had to infiltrate an Alaskan military base overrun by terrorists and prevent them from launching the top-secret nuclear weapon, Metal Gear.



programmers and designers are doing their best to make it all happen."

Kojima certainly must have his team working overtime, because the amount of environmental interaction is unprecedented. Knock over the ice bucket in the bar, and the ice cubes will spill across the counter. If you sit and watch them, they will slowly start to melt. Shoot a larger bottle, and it will break into pieces — then you can shoot the bigger pieces into smaller pieces.

Everything is fully 3D, and we're not talking about paper-doll environments with flimsy polygonal shells. Every game element with reactive properties has been modeled to the core. For example, a fire in the store room will reveal that the sacks of flour actually contain flour, while melons on a tray, if shot, will break apart to reveal their inner fruit. Kojima says the team has focused more on modeling the physical nature of environments rather than on the polygonal throughput. This may be true, but we've yet to see another PS2 game that visually surpasses it. Snake is minimally a 2000-polygon model, and there's nary an unwarranted angle or edge to be found on him anywhere.

While the game takes us to a new plane of virtual existence, certain cartoon elements still persist — sleeping soldiers

(possibly the victim of your tranquilizer gun) dispense little Zs that float out of their mouths and fade away above their heads. So why does Kojima feel he needs to limit the realism this way?

"This is an action game," he explains, "and various elements must look different at a very noticeable and intuitive level. The difference between a sleeping soldier and dead soldier must be very obvious so that the player can tell the difference in just one glance while fighting or hiding from the enemy. The same holds true with the graphics of the items. The realism must never interfere with comfortable gameplay."

Know Your Enemy

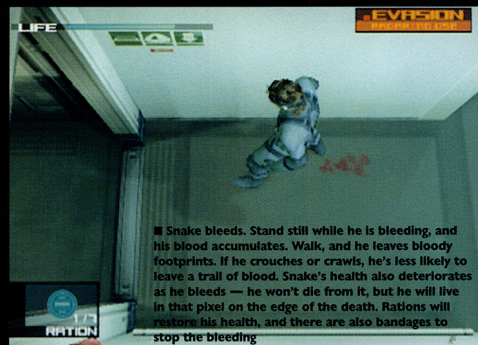
SNAKE's first objective in the game is to make his way to the ship's bridge. He's equipped with tranquilizer gun and must take out a few enemies along the way. But it won't be easy. "The enemy AI is definitely better in MGS2," Kojima says. "However, if it is made too clever, a typical player would not be able to infiltrate enemy territory. The play experience would no longer be enjoyable."

Like a good action flick director, Kojima had a military advisor help create a sense of realism for the soldiers, but there was more to it than just making them good soldiers. "I would also like to give character

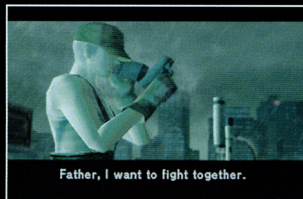
to the soldiers," Kojima says. "Even though the AI is smarter, I'm staying away from creating human killing machines."

To this end, it's possible to catch soldiers in idle animations — stretching, shrugging, and even dozing off. Still, each of the soldiers carries a radio, and enemies are now more likely to work together strategically as a unit when searching out Snake. "If a radio signal is cut off," Ogasawara intimates, "they will send someone to check it out."

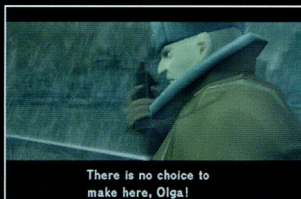
The game also offers five modes of difficulty from very easy to very hard. In the very hard mode, if you're spotted, the game is



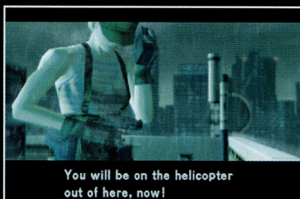
→ Cover Story



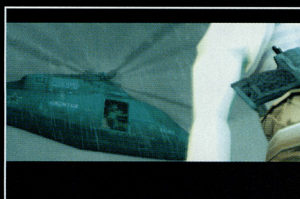
Father, I want to fight together.



There is no choice to make here, Olga!



You will be on the helicopter out of here, now!



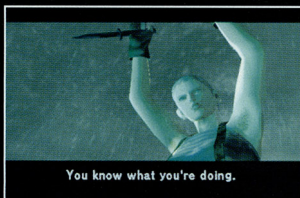
All entry and exit points to the tanker holds secured.



What else do you have there?



Take the knife and toss it.



You know what you're doing.

over. The items are rearranged in the different modes, and the guard placement changes as well. The more difficult the mode, the longer it takes for Snake's tranquilizer darts to go into effect, and the duration of the sleep is shorter.

Know Your Bosses

From the first *Metal Gear* game's fictitious country of Outer Heaven (see sidebar) to *MGS2*'s very real representation of New York Harbor, Kojima's games have followed a path that trends more and more towards that of the real world. From what we've seen of *MGS2*, enemy bosses are losing their comic-book level of arch-villain design, and becoming a little bit more of the real-world terrorist. "Boss characters will appear,"

Kojima intimates. "However, their names will not be the code names you are used to."

The character designs come from the minds of Kojima and his designer Yoji Shinkawa, who was also responsible for the graphic design of the characters in *Metal Gear Solid*. The development team, meanwhile, does an incredible job setting up the first boss battle with Olga Gurlukovitch, who is quite plainly a very dangerous, battle-hardened woman. Olga and the General's relationship is a curious one, and although her radio conversation with the General is seemingly ripped straight out of the script of *An Officer and a Gentleman* ("I got nowhere else to go!"), it is incredibly choreographed and charges you for the battle. If this is the level of quality we can expect in confronta-

tions with other bosses, we can hardly wait.

Know your Game

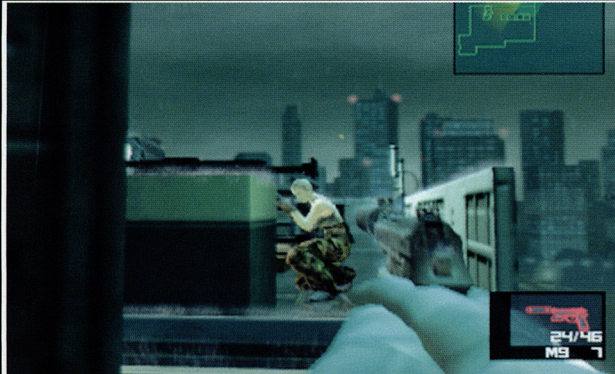
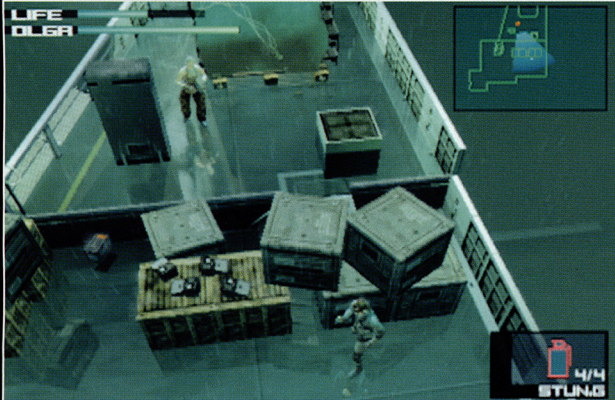
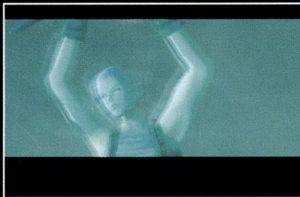
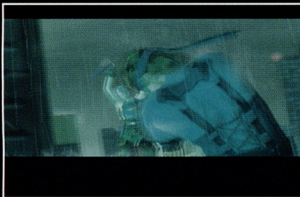
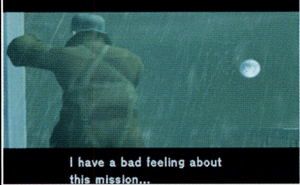
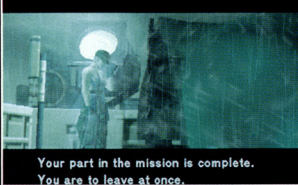
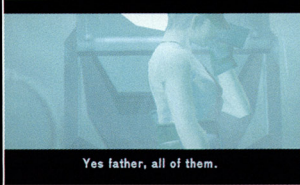
Metal Gear Solid 2 will not be a simple game to play, and from a strict gameplay perspective, *MGS2* doesn't offer a lot that is different from what was so wonderfully honed in *Metal Gear Solid*. What has changed is the level of tension — this playable version creates a feeling of suspense unlike any we've ever experienced. In that sense alone, *MGS2* passes the next-generation gameplay test.

From what we've seen, the overall industrial environment of the ship felt similar to the base interior from *Metal Gear Solid*. The corridors of the ship were also very similar to each other and could get a bit confusing. Despite the incredibly polished state of the demo, and as much insight we've gained from it, there are many things we still don't know about the game. Kojima outright refused to tell us how much of the game is revealed in the demo and how long the game will be. (The most common criticism of the last *Metal Gear* game was that it was a bit brief.) He also refused to tell us if a VR training mode would be included in the final product.

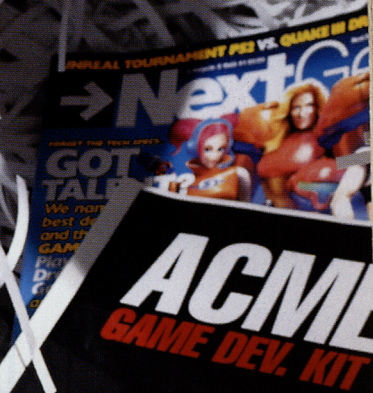
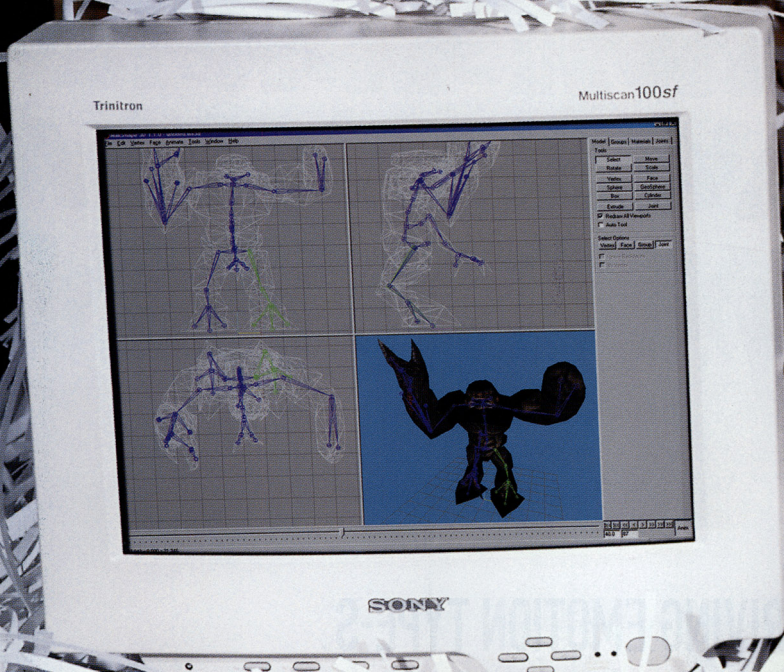
We are, however, firm believers that this title will be finished by this fall. We're thinking a September release is likely, although Konami isn't ready to commit to a specific month just yet. And between now and fall, we expect some games to be shown that will significantly alter the landscape of gaming. Already there are new Xbox games being shown, and GameCube games are coming. But as of now, we've seen nothing — absolutely nothing — to suggest there will be a better game released on any system this year. Period. — Tom Russo/Blake Fischer



■ Clearly Kojima understands the value of a slow fade. This is an actual screenshot we took during the cut scene featuring Snake and Olga



■ Snake's first boss battle is with Olga. This one-on-one gunfight is set up with a dramatic cut scene (see the stills running from left to right across the tops of both pages). Olga will shoot at Snake, and occasionally she hurls grenades at him





START YOUR OWN GAME COMPANY

Forget just getting a job in the industry — we'll tell how to start running the industry



Mike Tyson Boxing. Armorines: Project Swarm. Wild Wild West. Ugh. Think you could do better? Of course you do! But it's not as easy as coming up with a good game idea — it's about managing a business, organizing a team, and working some incredibly long hours to turn that great game idea into a respectable piece of software.

But if you live and die games, this may be a sacrifice you are willing to make, and you can make a difference in the videogame industry by starting your own game company... But you'll need help. **Next Generation** taps the experts to find out how they got started and guides you through the challenges of becoming the next Maxis or Naughty Dog. It all starts on the next page.

■ DIARY OF A SHOOTER

On id Software's 10th anniversary, take a stroll down memory lane with company founders John Carmack and Kevin Cloud.....**Page 68**

■ OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Your big break could come at the Independent Games Festival.....**Page 72**

➔ Why slave away for The Man, when you can be The Man? Everyone dreams of being the boss, and the game industry is no different. Creative control, setting your own rules, being wined and dined by publishers who want your game — what's not to like? Plenty. For one thing, running your own company is a hell of a lot harder than working at someone else's. Second, working for someone else can give you tons of experience (both in what to do, and what not to do). And perhaps most important, while you don't need any money to work for someone, to start your own company, you do need cash. Lots.

The reason there aren't a lot of successful game companies around is that it's hard work. So if you really don't want to spend the next five (or 20) years of your life trying to get a company off the ground — dealing with bill collectors, deadbeat clients and publishers, employee hassles, landlords, government regulations, and withholding taxes — why bother? Let some other schmuck deal with all

that, while you concentrate on the fun part — making games.

But if founding a company is so hard, why are so many new game companies cropping up every day, from corporate splinter groups like Double Fine and 7 Studios to brand new startups like Treyarch and Wolfpack? It's simple. Despite all the hassles and risks we mentioned (plus plenty more we didn't, but we'll get to that later), some pretty amazing advantages await those who choose this path.

Independence. Freedom. The chance to turn your dream — not someone else's — into reality. The satisfaction of building a company from the ground up. And of course, just maybe, the potential to fill a swimming pool with cash.

For Jon Botti, president of Black Ops, the motivation was even more simple: "I decided to start Black Ops due to my desire to ship games on time. I was working at a large publisher that had gone through management changes and internally was unable to get a firm date on when my next game would ship. As

an outside contractor, I would have a schedule and a budget, and be able to stick to it without management constantly making changes." Of course, having an entrepreneurial streak helps, too; Black Ops is the ninth company that Botti has founded.

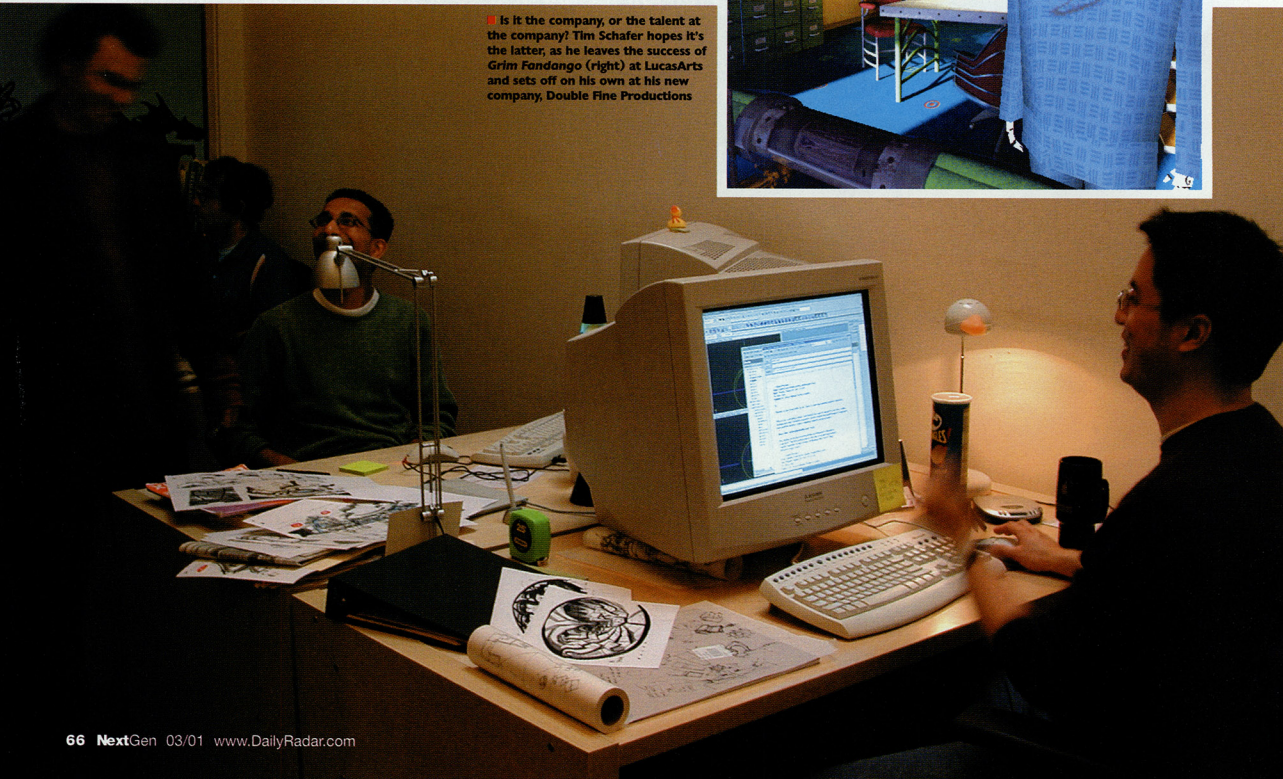
Others are looking for a change of pace. "Our last venture was in database technology — real boring stuff," explains Wolfpack Studios Vice President of Sales and Marketing Todd Coleman. "We decided that we actually want to look forward to coming in to work every day."

Even if you love the company you work for, it frequently isn't the same as striking out on your own. Tim Schafer created *Full Throttle* and *Grim Fandango* at LucasArts before setting out on his own and founding Double

"We decided that we actually want to look forward to coming in to work every day."

— Todd Coleman, VP of sales and marketing, Wolfpack Studios

■ Is it the company, or the talent at the company? Tim Schafer hopes it's the latter, as he leaves the success of *Grim Fandango* (right) at LucasArts and sets off on his own at his new company, Double Fine Productions





■ **The House That Defender Built:** Digital Eclipse President Andrew Ayre turned a few arcade ports into a profitable business

Fine Productions in San Francisco. "It was kind of my thought the last few years that doing my own company was all I had left to do — I'd kind of maxed out at LucasArts, so what else was there to do but start my own company? A concern was that I didn't want to worry about [the little things] like getting Xerox paper and cleaning the bathrooms; I just wanted to work on the games. But I finally realized those problems, and there are a million of them, weren't a big deal at all."

Getting Started

There are various strategies for starting your own game company, from making a shareware game by yourself in your free time to cluelessly spending millions on office space before you even create a design document (also known as the dot-com model). How you should (and can) establish yourself depends mostly on where you are today, although many elements are the same no matter who you are. To make things a little easier, start by answering these two questions:

1) Do you have a source of independent funds that will get the company up and running for a period of some months without additional outside investment?

2) Are you already a recognized "name" in the game business, or do you at least have game business experience?

Here's a little matrix on how to proceed based on your answers to the questions. (We'll explain the terms in a minute.)

QUESTION 1	QUESTION 2	COMPANY	PUBLISHER
No	No	on the cheap	whatever it takes
Yes	No	start small	try for a deal
No	Yes	on the cheap	go for a deal
Yes	Yes	start it up+	get a deal+

How It All Works

Most games are funded by a publisher that makes payments based on the development team's ability to meet milestones of production. The developer uses those milestone payments to pay employees, utility bills, etc. When the game is finished, a developer may see some cash from the publisher — that is, if the game

"Don't listen to anyone who tells you, 'It's too complicated' or 'You need business experience.' Just do it."

— John Botti, president, Black Ops

makes any profit. Remember, debits on the accounting books include everything from producing the game boxes to buying ads to express mailing review copies to journalists. Only after these costs are paid will the developer see any royalty payments.

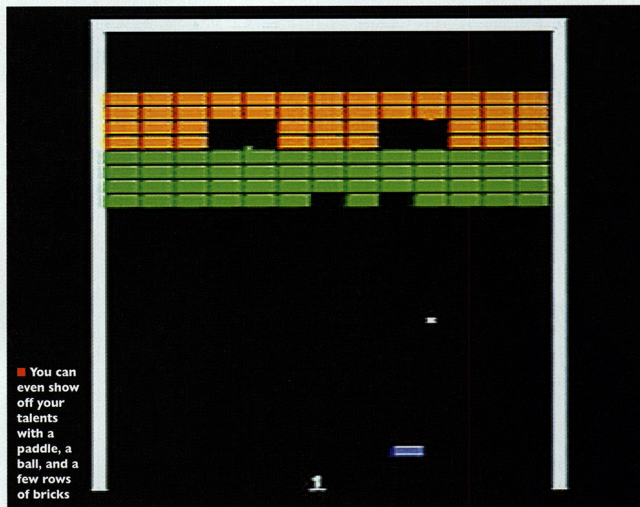
Unfortunately, there are opportunities for all sorts of blackmail in this relationship — the publisher can withhold milestone payments to bend the developer to its will, or the developer can threaten to go out of business (leaving the publisher with a wasted investment in an unfinished game) unless a milestone payment is made, even if the milestone is missed — and such things absolutely happen, all the time. But in general, assuming both parties are reasonably honest, it works pretty well. (We'll dive into this more deeply in the Publisher section.)

Your Company

The first step in starting your own company is... simply declare your company started! Pick a name, but don't get too attached to it, since you may have to change it later. You'd be surprised to learn how many names are already spoken for. Here's a tip: Try not to pick something already taken, like EA or Activision. Black Ops' Botti agrees: "You need the confidence to start your company today. Just come up with a cool name that gets you excited and go ahead and start it. Don't listen to anyone who tells you, 'It's too complicated,' or 'You need to spend lots of money,' or 'You need business experience.' Just do it." So congratulations, you're on your way to being the next Extremist Studios!

Next comes the hard part, unless you have an MBA or a lot of business experience. "Ask everyone you know if they know a good lawyer, because once you have a good lawyer, you can start being official," advises Double Fine's Schaffer. This will be your first taste of real paperwork — not the kind that you can just bang out on pretty stationary, but the kind that people spend years at business and law school to understand. When you start your company, you basically have four choices: a sole proprietorship, a partnership, a corporation, and a limited liability corporation (LLC). Each of these has various advantages and disadvantages. An easy way to understand these is to think of them as fighter ships in a shooter game: A sole proprietorship is fast but has no armor, while a corporation is slow but hard to kill, and a partnership and LLC are right in the middle. OK, that's a stretch, but there is an element of truth to it.

The easiest (and cheapest) kind of company to form is a sole proprietorship. It is essentially you doing business as your company name (these companies are sometimes called DBAs, for "doing business as"). Setting up a DBA varies from state to state, but it generally just involves filling out a form and paying a small fee. Any library will have a book that explains exactly how to do it in your state. A sole proprietorship enables you to do such things as getting a checking account for your business, even though it's really just you. All the income is treated as personal income, and you are fully liable for the business — if someone sues the business, they are suing you and can get your



personal assets if they win. Bottom line, a DBA is the easy way to start your company and can usually be done without a lawyer.

Next up the ladder is a partnership — this is basically just a DBA that includes more than one person. A lawyer can set it up for you, but you can also find standard partnership agreements in a library. **IMPORTANT WARNING:** No business is as likely to lead to lawsuits and general unhappiness as a partnership that does not have a clearly defined contract. What happens if one partner dies? Wants to sell out? Has an irreconcilable difference with another partner? Loses half his partnership in a divorce?

Who decides who can take what out of the company account? These questions may seem like no big deal now, but if you don't know the answers to these questions and your game is a hit and your partnership generates tons of money, the only people who'll get rich are the lawyers. Do yourself a favor and spend the \$500 now to have a lawyer draw up a fair agreement. This will save you a lot more money and more than a few headaches in the long run. If you're starting your company with a friend, and you want to do it on the cheap, this is the way to go, but be careful and do it right.

Corporations are the big time. In lawyer-

speak, they are "a creature of the state," or an artificial person. They have stock (even if that stock isn't publicly traded), directors, and far more paperwork than a DBA or partnership. They also provide an important benefit: Unless you do something especially illegal, you, as a stockholder in a corporation, can't be held personally liable for what the corporation does. No one can get at your assets if the corporation folds. The corporation has its own assets, and its income is not taxed the way your personal income is, nor is corporate income looked at as personal income as in a DBA and partnership. There are two kinds of corporations, C and S. In

SECRET OF MY SUCCESS: ID SOFTWARE 10 YEARS LATER

John Carmack and Kevin Cloud on how it all began

→ **Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, Quake** — few companies have had an impact on gaming like id Software. But 10 years ago, id was just like any other game startup: full of big ideas, boundless energy, and dreams of knocking the game industry on its ass. Sound familiar? Hundreds of aspiring developers have come and gone hoping to deliver games with the same kind of impact as id's.

On the 10th anniversary of the founding of id Software, we spoke to its co-owners,

Technical Director John Carmack and Artist Kevin Cloud, about how they became the biggest "small" game company around.

Next Gen: Take us back 10 years to the beginning, before the rocket launchers, Ferraris, and magazine covers. What was it like in '91 when id was founded?

John Carmack: Tom [Hall, cofounder] was a bit nervous, but John Romero had limitless confidence. I was only 20 years old, so I didn't see too much of a potential downside.

The business arrangements were hardly given any thought. Jay [Wilbur, cofounder] was the only one among us that balanced his checkbook and talked to lawyers, so he took care of what we needed.

NG: Was your office anything like the flashy uptown digs you have now?

JC: Let's just say banquet tables are a start-up company's best furniture. We started with \$10,000 from Scott Miller at Apogee, but we were working during nights and weekends while we were still employed at Softdisk. That was a bad move, which got us into some later legal trouble.

NG: What were the biggest challenges during the early years?

Kevin Cloud: [We were unprepared for]

contracts, insurance, phones, offices, deadlines, advertising, packaging, retail — basically everything except making games. In essence, we had the "game" part down pretty well, but didn't have a strong grasp of the "business" part.

NG: Did this lack of business knowledge create a lot of growing pains as id evolved into the company it is today?

KC: Ironically, the biggest growing pain was agreeing not to grow, at least not in the traditional sense. id's still small enough to be considered very small and on many levels operates like a startup. Corporate growth certainly works for many companies — at least EA isn't complaining — but none of us enjoy managing other people.

Instead, we've chosen to grow in less traditional methods, such as supporting the development of our mod community through the release of source code and contracting outside developers to create free tools, and through the licensing of our technology.

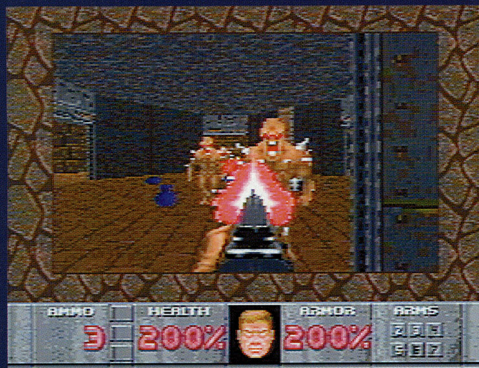
NG: Have your original goals changed in the last decade?

KC: From the beginning, id's goals have been to make games we enjoy playing and to stay independent. We've had countless smaller goals, and I would say we've probably failed as often as we've succeeded. But id's fundamental





■ Full Throttle helped propel Tim Schafer to the top, establishing his name in the minds of game publishers



■ John Carmack (left, below) was once a naive 20-year-old, but he's grown up through his work on Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, and Quake III Arena (clockwise from right top)



goals have not changed, and each year our primary question is the same as the one we faced nearly 10 years ago — what do we need to do to make a fun game?

NG: What milestone stands the most?

KC: Simply getting started is one of id's biggest accomplishments — the rest has been pretty easy! Seriously, though, there are so many accomplishments that id is proud of. We were the first game developer to create a true 3D game engine, the first to truly make network/Internet gaming in a realtime 3D environment possible, and the first to make shareware a legitimate marketing and sales tool. But id's most notable accomplishment would probably be the creation of the first-person shooter genre with Wolfenstein 3D. The creation of a genre, especially one as important as the FPS, is something that rarely happens.

NG: If you had the chance to do one thing over in the last 10 years, what would it be?

JC: I can make a pretty strong case that all of the new technology implemented in Quake should have been rolled out across two separate games. On the other hand, Quake was pretty important to the emergence of the 3D

a C corporation, certain things end up getting taxed twice, while an S corporation has more paperwork but less double-taxing. Being a C corporation gives you certain benefits, like being able to give stock options, but if you're just starting out and you want to incorporate, an S corp is probably the way to go. While it's theoretically possible to set up a corporation without a lawyer, it is a major, major hassle, and if you don't have the money to pay a lawyer to incorporate, you're probably better off with a DBA anyway.

The final type of company to consider is a limited liability company. An LLC gives you many

of the benefits of a corporation (like, well, limited liability) without a lot of the hassles (directors, stock). Again, it's probably best to let a lawyer handle this for you, but you can do it yourself — there are even web sites like www.incorporate.com that will help you out.

Which type of company is for you? Look back at the matrix on page 67. If you don't have a lot of cash, go with a DBA or partnership — they're the cheapest and easiest and you probably don't have a lot to lose to begin with. You probably will be making your first game or demo without any employees, so why prepare for coworkers who don't exist?

accelerators, and I would hate to have set that [development] back significantly.

NG: What advice do you have for a fledgling programmer or designer who wants to start his or her own game company?

JC: Do a game mod first! The high-end mods are game development in miniature, and you can learn most of the lessons you need by taking one all the way from concept to polished release. You might also decide that it isn't as much fun as you thought. And if you're more interested in the game itself than the process and technology, I would strongly recommend using as much existing infrastructure as possible, in the form of licensed engines, tools, and libraries.

If you do want to do everything from scratch, pick an approach that isn't going to go head-to-head with the leaders in a genre. We are at the point now where it takes two years or more for an existing professional team to build everything, even with access to their existing base of code and media. It isn't reasonable to expect a brand new team of beginners to compete against that. However, I still believe that there can be innovative approaches that turn out something fun and marketable without having to invest 50

developer years into it.

Another option is to look at smaller platforms. There are going to be some interesting developments in the handheld market over the coming years, and without a DVD to fill up with content, a team of a half dozen developers could still do something that fully exploits their capabilities.

NG: Given that the company is now a whopping 10 years old and will likely be around for at least 10 more, what's the one thing you'd admit now about id that you wouldn't have before?

KC: Perhaps the only thing is that most of us didn't expect id to last this long...



If you have money, either seed money to invest or a publishing deal, an LLC is the way to go. You get the limited liability without all the hassles of a full corporation. In fact, unless you plan on going public or issuing stock options (or your investors want a seat on the board to keep an eye on you), there's really little reason to even bother with a corporation. Talk to a lawyer, though, who will help you pick the appropriate company type. And don't worry — you can always change the company type later.

Once you establish the company, there are some simple things to do. Get a checking account. Buy a fax machine (even in the Internet age, this is essential, owing to all the legal documents you'll need to sign). Register your URL and set up your domain and email server. Find and register an original name with the trademark office — this is \$250 well spent. Start saving every receipt related to the business — you'll need them for tax write-offs.

Next, set up your office space. This doesn't have to be rented space just yet, either. If you're starting on the cheap, it can be your basement or garage. Just make sure you use the space only for business, so you can deduct it from your rent or mortgage payments as a business expense. You want the space to be cool and reflect the kind of company you've created. As Double Fine's Schafer says: "I want the office to be a place where the people I want to hire see it and want to work there."

"I want the office to be a place where the people I want to hire see it and want to work there."

— Tim Schafer, Double Fine Productions

And unless you have back trouble, you probably don't need to spend (or even drool over) \$1000 Aeron chairs right now. Gabe Newell, president of Valve, uses two brown folding tables as his desk, and if millionaire Gabe Newell doesn't need an expensive desk, you do not need an expensive desk. What you need is a contract with a publisher.

But before you get that contract, you'll need money to get going. Raising the cash to start the company and keep it chugging along until you get that first contract is key. "The biggest challenge in starting the company has been raising capital," says Glenn Halseth, vice president of sales and marketing at Interactive Imagination. "The market is changing. It's been our challenge to educate investors on the entertainment industry and the intricacies of our revenue models."

Even an industry veteran with a proven track record and a good reputation can have a difficult time convincing a publisher that they're worth the enormous financial gamble. Remember, in today's grown-up gaming world, people are risking millions of dollars. "[When we set out] we had enough money to last six months, which I thought would be more than enough to find a publisher," says Double Fine's Schafer. "Well, it's been nine months, and let's just say I get excited every time I find a credit card I'd forgotten about [that's not maxed out]. Even when you find a publisher and you love



■ This is the desk (left) where *Dungeon Siege* (top) got started; Gas Powered Games founder and electrician Chris Taylor (right)



each other, it can still take months to iron out the little details."

So where can you find investors to get the company up and running? The traditional source of backing is venture capitalists, but they've been so stung by the dot-com collapse that you'd basically need to be John Carmack to get venture money these days. If you have savings, of course, you can self-invest (Schafer jokes that much of Double Fine was funded "by the generous contributions of Ben Throttle"), and then there are angel investors — investors on a private level that can help you get started. Angel investors can be anyone from a friend or family member to an investment firm. Angel firms generally help people with great ideas but nothing else — they're a great source of investment money, but in exchange for the cash infusion, you'll usually end up surrendering some of your business decision-making freedom and a healthy percentage of future revenue.

How much cash do you need? It all depends



■ Tim Schafer stands before Double Fine Productions' recently tagged garage door — inside you'll find a ping-pong table, credit card bills, and enough coffee to last through the end of 2001



"We just hired a 19-year-old kid from Montana, and he's better than a lot of the guys with 'industry experience'..."

— Mike Mika, creative director, Digital Eclipse

on your expenses. Expenditures to consider include flights for meetings and trade shows, rent for six to 12 months, and of course, equipment like computers and software.

The next step, if you can afford it, is to hire people. Everyone we spoke to agrees that this is absolutely the toughest part of the process, but also the most satisfying. "The biggest challenge is finding the best people and keeping them excited," says Chris Taylor of Gas Powered Games. "You can't do it without great people." Few individuals, even the most talented, can create a successful game without a bright team with which to collaborate. Schafer agrees: "It has to be a mutual trust thing. I'm giving [employees] a piece of the company and trusting that they'll exceed, but they're trusting me, too — they're saying, 'I'm going to give up my job to work for Tim, and there's no contract, and no parking.'"

Tim Schafer and Chris Taylor both have great track records and have proven they can succeed. You may not. So don't try to hire superstars, but look for young, hungry, hard-working types. And don't be narrow-minded and consider hiring only those who live on the West Coast and have previous experience working at a game company. The rest of the country is filled with talented people looking for their big chance. Hire them. "We just hired a 19-year-old kid from Montana, and he's better than a lot of guys with 'industry experience' who are jaded, not that great, and require three times as much money to bring onboard," says Mike Mika, creative director of Digital Eclipse.

How many people do you need? At the very least, to get a demo up and running, you'll need a programmer and an artist or two. Sound people, game designers, and producers are all important as well, but the core will be the lead

programmer and lead artist. If you're working with a bare-bones budget, there's no better place to find inexpensive talent than a college campus. Finally, headhunters can help you find people as well, but unless you're very well funded, it may be tough to afford their services. Your lawyer can direct you to a payroll service that will handle all the various deductions and tax issues, and you'll need insurance (worker's comp, health, business, etc.) too, so look for an agent you trust. An accountant or bookkeeper can oversee it all. It sounds confusing, but it doesn't have to be, as long as you have people who know the things you don't. "You just have to get a lot of advisors," says Double Fine's Schafer. "You're doing it by yourself, but you're gradually gathering experts around you."

The Game

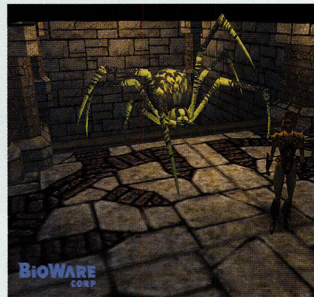
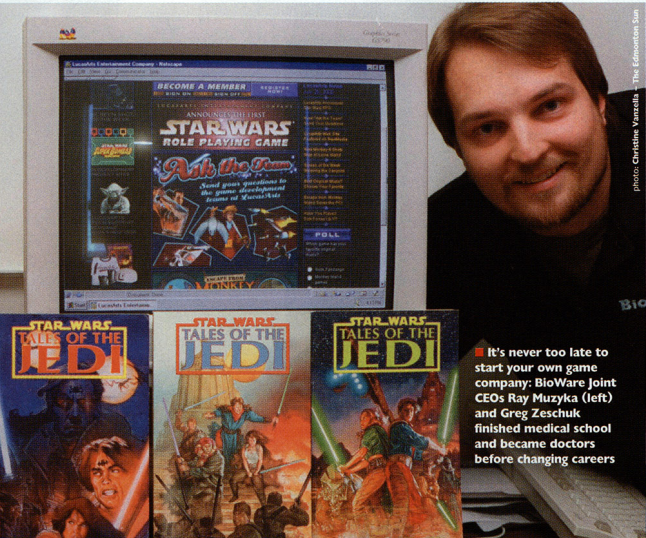
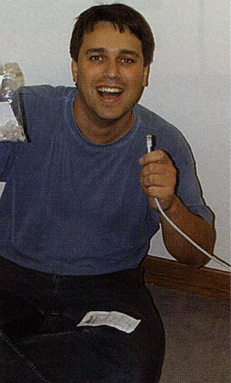
Once you've got your company together, it's time to turn your great game idea into a great game. Unless you're an industry superstar, you'll need more than a design document before any publisher will talk to you. You need a demo. Make the demo. Copyright the demo. Trademark any characters in the demo. You may end up assigning these rights to the publisher later, but for now, let the world know you are keeping them for yourself. If you don't have the cash, you don't need to register the trademarks or even the copyright, but still mark them with a "TM" (not an "®," which indicates a registration) and a "©" to indicate that you are protecting them.

An unfortunate reality is that if you're just starting out, your demo probably won't make it to a store shelf. Publishers view demos as a test — it's just to show the quality of work you can do. But that doesn't mean your demo is a waste of time. It allows you to bring bright ideas



and techniques to life, and you can always finish the prototype after you've established yourself. Another harsh reality is access to technology. PlayStation 2 is where it's at, right? Good luck starting a game without a development kit, and you can't simply drop a line to Sony and expect one in the mail. Dev kits are usually bought by publishers for thousands of dollars, who supply them to developers deemed worthy. So do your demo for the PC. The publisher, if interested, will provide any future dev kits you need. Make your demo as cool as possible. Don't waste a lot of time in your design doc on the backstory: No one cares. As hard as it may be to believe, no one wants to read about how Zork will finally get his revenge after 10,000 years, and the marketing department will just rewrite it all anyway. What they'll care about is the technology (and to a lesser extent, the gameplay) in the demo, and if you've worked on projects (even outside of gaming) that have shipped, preferably on time.

Here's something that's extremely important. Publishers may not care too much about your demo. But you have to care. Even if you go in with a pitch for a massively multiplayer Xbox game and leave with a contract to port *Petunia Pig* to a cell phone, don't ever lose sight about why you're starting it — to make great games. "The business aspects can be so distracting," says Schafer. "The other day someone asked me about the game we're working on and I thought, 'The game? Oh yeah, the game!' You just have to force it into your schedule — I will work on the game for X amount of time a day, even if everything is collapsing. Otherwise you just become a full-time office manager." Good point. On second thought, leave in your story about Zork — because even if the publisher doesn't care, you do.



Once upon a time, *Neverwinter Nights* was just a glimmer in the eyes of BioWare

The Publishers

Once you have your company set up and your demo underway, it's time to get a deal. While publishers, for legal reasons, ignore unsolicited game ideas, they are usually more than happy to talk to a new developer representative to see if there's some work you can do together (in an ideal world, at least).

The reality is that it can be hard to get product-acquisition people on the phone. And how do you even find out who the product-acquisition people are? If you've worked in the game industry at all, you probably know someone who knows someone who may know

a person you can talk to, and even if they aren't the right person, they may know the right person. If you're totally new, call the front desk of your publisher target and ask for the product-acquisition department. Or pick the producer's name out of a game manual and call him or her directly, which will probably result in a redirect to the right person. Can't find a company's number? Be resourceful. If it's not on the company web site, just call information in the publisher's home town.

If you are smart, resourceful, persistent, and polite, you will find someone who will talk to you. And — no big surprise — most people

you talk to are sympathetic to a new developer. Most of the people in the game industry — even publishers — are pretty nice and will often respond well to polite inquiries. But on the other hand, remember that they're busy people who may not return your phone call because they simply forgot. They may promise to email you and forget moments after hanging up the phone. But they aren't evil. Be persistent and polite, and you will get in front of a publisher. You can also improve your chances by going where the publishers are — E3, GDC, etc. Talk to everyone there. Be single-minded in your determination and it will happen.



■ **Black Ops'** John Botti (above) and his company have created 10 games, including *Tomorrow Never Dies* (right)

MAKE A SPECTACLE OF YOURSELF IT'S SHOW TIME

The Independent Games Festival is a great way to establish your company

→ So you've started your own game company and are working on the next *Half-Life* — what now? Well, you need to find a publisher who can get your game onto shelves at Electronics Boutique, or else no one will know how great your game is. Publishers get pitched hundreds of games a year, but one way you can stand out from the crowd is at the Independent Games Festival, an annual showcase of talent at the

Game Developers Conference in San Jose, Calif. At this year's festival, being held Mar. 20-24, 10 finalists are competing for the Seumas McNally \$10,000 Grand Prize, and perhaps more importantly, the interest of a game publisher.

"Publishers are always on the prowl for new games that will make them money, and they look to the IGF for creative designs," explains IGF Chairman Alex Dunne. "It's up

to us, in the game development community, to encourage that creativity and give the independent a chance to connect with publishers. That's a primary goal of the IGF: to give the independent a chance to get introduced to publishers and promote the art form of game creation."



■ Toronto-based Magitech Corporation's *Tokeda* is a strategy game that eliminates resource management to focus the gamer on waging war — and a finalist at the IGF



■ *Tread Marks* (left) won last year's Seumas McNally \$10,000 Grand Prize; *Hardwood Spades* (below) is Silver Creek Entertainment's magic entry that made it to the IGF finals





And when you finally get your shot, be prepared. Make sure you've worked on your people skills — you'll need to make a good impression and be able to present your demo at the drop of a hat anywhere in the world, whether in a hallway at GDC, at an airport in Phoenix, or in a suite at E3. Always have plenty of copies of your design doc. Make business cards. Take a shower, every day that you might see a publisher. Shave. Try to convey a sense that you will be very responsible with the two million or so dollars you want to develop Zartok's Revenge, that you will deliver it on time and under budget, and that it'll be the next *Half-Life*.

Once you get the meeting, you need to prove that what you have is worth their attention, which is pretty much up to you and the quality of your demo. If the publisher is impressed, they may offer you some seed money to develop the prototype further. Or they may offer you another game (or a port) to see how you work together. Or they may ask for changes (for you to make without any funding) and another look.

Of course, after all the effort of getting the game in front of them, the publisher may pass. If so, start again.

One very rare — yet entirely possible —



■ Vermont's Interadventure hopes to win the \$10,000 prize with *Hostile Space* (above); Interadventure members Doug Cobb and Eric Robertson (right)

Despite the interactive-entertainment industry's evolution into a high-stakes business, the IGF reminds people that there is still a place for the guy who doesn't have an MBA but is armed with good ideas, talent, and pure enthusiasm about gaming. The IGF isn't a forum for veterans either — you won't find Insomniac Games strutting its latest version of *Spyro* against less established brethren. What you will find is a collection of development groups who haven't yet hit the big time. In fact, the initial motivation behind many IGF entries was simply to make something fun for their designers to play. This zest for gaming is what attracts the suits.

"Infogrames is absolutely interested in independent developers and realizes that a lot of the most creative and passionate work takes place by independents," says Infogrames Senior Vice President of Publishing Jason Bell. "We're always looking for innovative gameplay and brilliant ideas. We'll be [at the IGF] this year, and we'll be on the lookout for the 'next big thing.'"

Of course, not every game shown at the IGF will be picked up by a major game publisher. In fact, in the three-year history of the event, several games have been picked



up by smaller publishers and/or are being sold online. Last year's winner, *Tread Marks*, was briefly distributed by Longbow Digital Arts and is now available for sale online. Andrew Leker sold his *Resurrection* game design (winner of IGF's 1999 Best Game Design) to Sega and reportedly joined the company to work on the game. As better tools and greater processing power become available, hobbyist developers are coming up with better games.

"Having judged the IGF last year, and as a judge this year, I am particularly impressed with the quality of titles competing this year," notes Susan Lewis, a former videogame agent now with Yummy Interactive.

The game industry isn't as exclusive as many believe — it's just filled with people who love games enough to take a chance and follow their dreams. If you need a bit of encouragement, listen to the advice of the IGF's Dunne: "Don't be scared off by what's going on in the press about game budgets getting bigger and requiring more resources to develop a successful game. All it takes is an excellent prototype to get picked up by a publisher, and at that point the publisher will provide the cash. If you have an idea, pursue it. As long as you have the programming and art talent there, you can do something that will get noticed."

— Kevin Toyama



■ Ethermoon's *Strifeshadow* is competing for an award in such categories as game design, technical excellence, and visual art



■ Some companies are as quirky as you'd imagine, such as Digital Eclipse's studio/boxing gym

situation is that the publisher may steal your idea. Safeguard your game with a mutual non-disclosure agreement, or NDA, that basically says both sides will keep everything secret. Your lawyer can draw one up, but your publisher isn't obligated to sign it. Remember, you want their support — not the other way around. What you do then is up to you. Bill Gates got the contract to do MS-DOS because he signed an NDA that the leading DOS maker of the time wouldn't sign.

If you're new, you may simply need to take what you can get. There is no shame in doing a port of a game, or a board-game conversion, or a Game Boy game. Heck, there probably wouldn't be a Digital Eclipse if not for their Defender emulation for Mac, and they've made a fortune on the strength of their Game Boy lineup. The money is still green, and you learn a lot during every project. Gas Powered Games' Taylor makes this point on breaking in: "If you want to build blockbuster titles that cost millions, then you will have a much harder time than if your goal is to be a porting house."

It's a fine line between doing whatever it takes to get your first break and staying true to yourself. Wolfpack's Coleman has a test to help find your personal balance between the two: "Ask yourself why you got into game development at all. Is your goal to make money? To build the game you've always wanted to build? Sometimes these two goals overlap, but more often the games we want to build (Renegade Zombie Cop) aren't the top sellers (Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Showtunes Edition)."

If you have money and can self-fund a project you want to do for a while, or if you have previous experience in some genre that a publisher finds interesting, you have more leverage. But unless you are at the top of the industry, your first hit is not going to make you rich. It's going to make your publisher rich. The game business is full of great companies and



■ When offices are a luxury, "work areas" are an alternative

great people, but it's still a business. Will you get a good deal? Probably. A bad deal? Definitely, unless you're careful. The things that you really want — ownership of the characters, sequel rights, etc. — are the exact things the publisher wants, too, and if you need the publisher's money to realize your game, well, you aren't really holding the best cards in the game. Naughty Dog, today regarded as one of the top developers in the biz, doesn't own Crash Bandicoot, the character they created, because when they first did their deal with Universal, the team didn't have the caché they do now.

Our advice? Don't worry about it. Look at your first hit as a loss leader. But don't sign any deals that force you into the same royalty structure for five games in a row. Of course, just because you'll probably have to settle for your first project doesn't mean you should go out looking to get screwed. Talk to everyone. Find out who the best publishers are for the game you want to do. Get the best deal you can. Make intelligent decisions by looking for a publisher with a good track record. Ask around. Who's good? Who promises the world but under-delivers? You may not be able to be too picky, but many a small developer have been killed by a publisher who let them slip through the cracks. At the same time, the publisher will look for stability on your end — no one wants to fund a project that will fold if the developer misses a milestone.

Developing Your First Game

Once you have the deal, whether it's for an original game, port, or something else, do your best not to have an adversarial relationship with your publisher. You guys are in this together, and not much is gained by fighting. Do publishers screw developers all the time? Yes. But that doesn't mean that the world is ending every time the milestone payment is a day late, or the company asks you to cut a difficult level. The more flexible you are, the more the publisher will want to work with you again. Of course, if the publisher is really taking



■ Is Wolfpack Studios' Shadowbane a game they wanted to build or one that will be a top seller — or both?

advantage of you, don't be blind to that, either.

Prepare to work harder than you ever have worked before. "We had to set up a company, a network, hire people, and do a game in 10 months," shares Black Ops' Botti. "We worked 75 to 80 hours a week, with the record being 114 hours in one week by Will Botti."

As we wrote in the beginning, success won't be handed to you on a silver platter. And because you're the boss, you have to accept the responsibilities of being the boss. "There's no safety net when running your own business, and no one's left holding the bag if you screw up except you and your employees," says BioWare Joint CEO Greg Zeschuck.

Maybe the experience of running a company is best summed up by the email sent by Double Fine's Schafer when contacted about being interviewed for this piece: "Is this a good time to meet? Well, we're right on the verge of signing a contract, on the verge of bankruptcy, and we're being evicted from our current space next week, so it's a pretty interesting time in the company's history..." Expect these kinds of things to happen, and expect them to happen every day — on top of the immense challenges of just creating a game. (Note: Double Fine's contract was successfully signed, the bankruptcy avoided, and new office space found — we told you happy endings are possible!)

On the flip side, developing a game and working hard with people you respect is incredibly rewarding, as is making a hit. "We've been fortunate to work with some very smart, creative, and talented people at BioWare.



■ Cool toys and posters make for a creative work environment

That's definitely the best part," says BioWare Joint CEO Ray Muzkya. "And it's a great feeling to know you're working on something — videogames — that can reach and impact a million or more people in a positive way."

Then What?

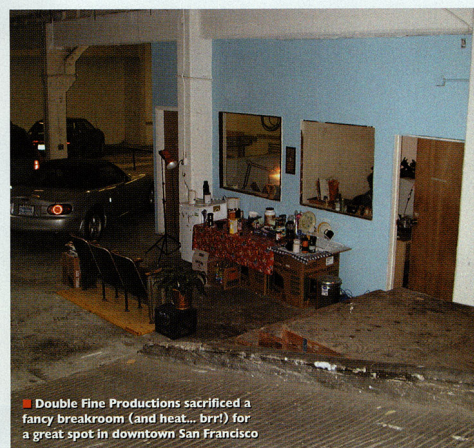
As the first project winds down, start looking for the second. Squirrel away as much cash as you can to fund original development. Hope for royalties. Keep working on getting a better

deal with every project. Work to make your games better every time. If you make a crappy game, it's not the end of the world, but recognize what went wrong and don't do it again. Start a second team. Be nice to your employees. Keep working toward making that ultimate game that you see in your head. And most importantly of all, don't forget — when you're about to start on that ultimate hit — who got you started, and slide your friends at **Next Gen** a couple of exclusives!

We'll give the last word on starting your own company to Schafer: "I've absolutely never worked so hard in my life. And I've never been so happy to come to work." — Chris Charla



■ There's no shame in working on a Game Boy title, especially a classic that everyone knows



■ Double Fine Productions sacrificed a fancy breakroom (and heat... br?) for a great spot in downtown San Francisco

→ Finals

Not every game plays as good as it looks — which is why it's a wise idea to look at this section very carefully

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■ It's a testament to the power of Square's game engine that the realtime scenes look nearly as good as the pre-rendered FMV



■ Power up your character with special moves and even these giant robots won't stand much of a chance

PLAYSTATION 2

The Bouncer

■ Publisher: Square ■ Developer: Square/Dream Factory

Don't believe the hype — not even ours

As has been proven time and time again, glitzy graphics and high production values are great, but only when they support — not substitute for — solid gameplay. With *The Bouncer*, Square has ignored this lesson and glaringly erred on the side of excessive FMV, with the result

being a tiresome exercise in movie watching with the occasional morsel of interaction thrown in. Sadly, this reminds us more of a Digital Pictures-designed Sega CD game, albeit one with outstanding PS2 graphics, than anything even remotely close to revolutionary. In fact, what passes for

gameplay here isn't even very much out of the ordinary.

You play as one of three bouncers who must rescue Dominique, a girl who has been kidnapped (yawn) by the evil Milkado corporation. After choosing which bouncer you want to be — each uses a different fighting

style — you then beat up any enemies you encounter using kicks, punches, and the occasional throw. While the game is obviously trying to be *Final Fight* for a new generation, the design misses the mark entirely thanks to the utterly braindead simplicity of the gameplay. The formula quickly degenerates into a repetitive cycle of blocking and counterattacking. Forget about all that environmental interactivity shown in the game's early demos; this world is as static as they come — the breaking barrels of *Streets of Rage* were adrenaline-pumping by comparison. As you beat more enemies you'll gain experience with

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The Finals Rating System

Since we're living in a time when even average games are pretty good, we at **Next Generation** will continue to demand even better. Note that a three-star rating is a typical "good" game, so expect to see a lot of them.

★★★★★	REVOLUTIONARY
★★★★☆	EXCELLENT
★★★☆☆	GOOD
★★☆☆☆	FAIR
★☆☆☆☆	BAD

● Denotes a review of a Japanese product

MULTIPLAYER BRAWLFEST

One of the cool features in *The Bouncer* is the four-player fighting mode. Those expecting a *Tobal 2*-like combat frenzy are bound to be disappointed with Dream Factory's latest, though, since it basically boils down to the same thing that makes the single-player game so simplistic: blocking and counterstriking. While getting four players into a single battle is goofy fun, the complete lack of technique will wear on everybody in no time at all. Instead of being a fun mini-game, it feels as if this mode were simply tacked on. Oh well...

which you can power up and buy new moves, but since it's actually quite simple to progress by relying on blocking and only one or two special attacks, in the end it's all a waste of time.

Further hampering any actual enjoyment is the atrocious pacing. Imagine this: After fighting off three to five enemies (which takes about one minute), you then get taken to the power-up and save menus (which takes one more minute), after which you are treated to an

abnormally long, if often stunningly beautiful, FMV (which then lasts five minutes or more). With a few exceptions, that cycle defines the whole game from beginning to end. By the time it's over your patience will be severely frayed, and the storyline isn't even remotely good enough to hold your interest in the absence of any other excitement. Luckily for our sanity, the entire experience isn't too long either; it took barely 90 minutes to finish the game the first time, and much less on each successive attempt — skip the videos and you can beat this thing in under half an hour.

Even with all of the gameplay problems, however, we admit *The Bouncer* shines as one of the most technically impressive titles we've seen. The visuals are superb, running in hi-res and at high, constant framerates. Even the FMVs are dazzling, and they feature Dolby 5.1 too (although unfortunately, the rest



■ Bosses can sometimes be ridiculously cheap, but if you have the right special moves you can "out-cheap" them and win easily



■ You get healed after almost every fight, so there's not much point in holding back

of the game appears to be in stereo). It's truly an amazing game to look at, and we wouldn't be surprised if this turned out to be the title hardcore gamers use to show off their systems to their friends.

Still, if *The Bouncer* is a beautiful graphical achievement, its lack of

depth keeps it from being anything more than a showpiece. We're glad that Square was able to bring the game's visuals up to the standards of the tech demo shown at the PS2 unveiling, but we wish they'd spent more time creating a cohesive game to back that up.

— Blake Fischer

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: *The Bouncer* manages to look good, but don't let that fool you into thinking that it's very fun.



■ Without question, the game's in-car presentation is the closest thing you can get to the real experience in a racing game

■ PLAYSTATION 2

Driving Emotion Type-S

■ Publisher: Square EA ■ Developer: Escape

A funny thing happened on the way to the racetrack...

➔ With Square's premier PlayStation 2 effort, *Driving Emotion Type-S*, the company once

again attempts to diversify its catalogue outside of RPGs. Unfortunately, most will wish it were a next-generation *Final Fantasy* title (see Alphas, page 30) and not this lackluster racer that had made it out of the gate first.

Upon its original release in Japan, the game was widely criticized for its woefully unforgiving handling. Thankfully, for the domestic release this problem was dealt with, and the game now delivers some nicely state-of-the-art, fluid control. However, now that the simple act of keeping the car on the track is no longer the game's focus, its other major problems become easier to spot.

Chief among these is the utterly relentless nature of the game. For one thing, the CPU-driven cars spend a lot of time trying to force you off the track, even at the risk

of their own standing. Combined with the tight pack in which they race, the game becomes one in which even the tiniest mistake can cost you the race. And since the only way to open new courses and cars is to place first, you can easily spend hours just trying to pull off a "perfect" race. Even then, you run the risk of being inhumanly drafted at the last second by an opponent. Toss in some lackluster courses and downright ugly texture flickering, and the game's wheels are left spinning on the starting grid.

To its credit, *Driving Emotion* does feature an impressive roster of real-world sports cars, some nice visual effects, and the most engaging in-car perspective we've encountered. But this does little to help what is otherwise a very mediocre experience overall. *Ridge Racer V* is still the best bet for sheer racing fun on PS2, and simulation fans will likely be best served by waiting for Sony's own *Gran Turismo 3*. — Randy Nelson

■ The game doesn't look especially bad, but it does suffer from some very distracting, almost hypnotizing texture flicker on most of its courses



ENextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: It had promise, but some major play balance and AI problems prove a major roadblock for Square's high-profile racing title.

F1 Championship Season 2000

■ Platform: PlayStation 2 ■ Publisher: EA Sports ■ Developer: EA

EA has had a decidedly mixed career on PS2 so far, from huge highs (*Madden*, *SSX*) to dismal lows (*NASCAR*, *X Squad*). *F1 Championship Season 2000* falls somewhere in the middle, but a little closer, we're happy to report, to *Madden* than *NASCAR*.

First off, this is a great, very simmy sim. If you want realistic control, realistic damage, and realistic fuel-use modeling, they're available, but you can also choose every option individually (want real damage but an automatic transmission? No problem). And of course, all the tracks and drivers from the 2000 season are here as well. The car models are detailed, and slower cars actually (usually, anyway) move out of your way when you're trying to overtake them. Overall the AI seems very good, as different drivers do use different styles that reflect their real-life counterparts.

Unfortunately, the game has some shortcomings. First, the assist is very poor. A good assist mode should let nearly anyone jump in and play, but it's going to be tough for an arcade fan to



■ Not the prettiest game on the block, this latest from EA Sports should still please hardcore F1 fans

get going in this. Purists won't mind, of course, but this really is a sim and not a "racing" game. More importantly, the graphics are surprisingly unremarkable and mostly resemble hypercharged original PlayStation graphics. *Test Drive Le Mans* looked far more lush and lifelike (with no draw-in, either), and that's "just" a Dreamcast game. The rain effects are unimpressive (it looks like 16-bit rain), and the exhaust lighting is pathetic, like an LED glued to the back of the car.

Still, the underlying racing engine is quite good, and to the kind of people who like F1 racing sims, that's what really matters. — Chris Charla

ENextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: If you don't mind the fact that the graphics aren't up to snuff, you will find a very good F1 game here.

RC Revenge Pro

■ Platform: PlayStation 2 ■ Publisher: Acclaim ■ Developer: Acclaim Studios Cheltenham

There's just no room anymore for racing games that suffer from identity problems. *RC Revenge Pro* is billed as a remote control race yet ultimately loses itself to kart racing antics, lousy course designs, and a framerate that, on some tracks, drops and rises more than the tourist elevator at the World Trade Center.

Set across five generic theme park stages (Horror World, Jungle World, etc.), you race against seven cars simultaneously, picking up traditional kart racing weapons such as rockets and mines. Despite the cheery, cartoonish graphics, the experience at its best is soft-soe vanilla.

The game includes an easy-to-use course editor, which enables you to quickly snap a track together like a virtual Tyco racing set. However, the limited selection of track segments



■ The silly environments in *RC Revenge Pro* do little to enhance this kart racing clone

were would-be designers just enough tools to make a circular track with a couple of hills.

Ultimately, the game's PlayStation roots are its downfall. The design is strangely modest, and based on some technical problems (long load times and a pretty bad spitscreen framerate and resolution), this port was sadly rushed out the door. — Tom Russo

ENextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Not without some merit, but there are far better uses for your new \$300 hardware.

Theme Park Roller Coaster

■ Platform: **PlayStation 2** ■ Publisher: **Electronic Arts** ■ Developer: **Bullfrog**

Truly, Bullfrog has nailed what makes an amusement park so magical, and packaged it as this remarkable sim (released on PC and PSX as *Sim Theme Park*). There are numerous enhancements to this latest version. Graphics and framerate are greatly improved, and coaster construction has been demystified by a data screen that warns you if you're going to bore the kids to sleep or send them running for the Dramamine. The first-person mode is now even more immersive, and nearly every ride can be ridden and every sideshow played.

However, thanks to being on a console, the interface is unwieldy, and pertinent information (say, how profits at a sideshow have changed since you lowered the odds of winning) aren't easily tracked. Also, the individual



■ If Walt Disney had designed *Sim City*, this would be it

parks are scaled down, with smaller maps and fewer rides to choose from.

But the only real down side is longevity. Adrenaline addicts or PC sim fans take note: This moves slowly, and actual goals are secondary to the atmosphere. Still, there's nothing better for those of us who think that big kids should still be allowed in the bouncy castle. — Eric Bratcher

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: A stripped-down PC sim that shares the strange, hypnotic appeal of amusement parks themselves — you can't logically explain why you're there, but you'll find yourself captivated, unable to wipe the smile from your face.

Top Gear Daredevil

■ Platform: **PlayStation 2** ■ Publisher: **Kemco** ■ Developer: **Papaya Studios**

PS2 owners complaining about a dearth of quality titles would do well to take *Top Gear Daredevil* for a spin. Although pint-sized in its depth and challenge, it's still terrific fun despite being light on adrenaline.

Much like the original *Top Gear* for N64, here you must prove your street cred among local gangs of hot-rodders by driving through four cities (which include Rome along with the now ubiquitous San Francisco, London, and Tokyo) and collecting the coins scattered about the streets. Strict time limits and heavy traffic ensure you have plenty of obstacles, both stationary and mobile, to smash into.

Though short on extras, the single-player Quest mode is well balanced and surprisingly addictive, with over 30 levels. Time-extending clocks and nitro-booster are scattered around, and it doesn't take long before the difficulty level makes them crucial. The result is a demanding road trip that's got as much to do with choosing the most expedient route (a handy map is onscreen at all times) as it is with does pulling off perfect three-point turns.



■ It's not the deepest racing game on the planet, but *Top Gear Daredevil* is a fun ride while it lasts

Each of the dozen cars is crisply modeled after real-world counterparts, though they bear such tough but cute names as Street Shark and P-Nut. While the vehicles vary greatly in performance, the handling tends to be floaty — though this goes hand in hand with the fairly rubbery physics.

The visuals are lacking in zing but still quite nice, with simple yet successful lighting and effects, a relatively smart camera, and plenty of details to help evoke the feel of each city. We'd like to have seen a little more variety in the missions and modes, but overall this is a pleasant diversion nonetheless. — David Chen

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: It's more a morsel than a meal, but it's perfect as a three-day rental.

■ PLAYSTATION 2

NCAA GameBreaker 2001

■ Publisher: **989 Sports** ■ Developer: **Red Zone**

College football fans vs. the son of *GameDay*



■ Here's an example of *GameBreaker*'s AI: The other players just follow the ball in one big pack

➔ In the world of sports games we're often forced to choose between the lesser of two evils. For instance, take the dilemma faced by PS2 owners who also happen to be hardcore college football fans: They have to choose between the son of *GameDay 2001* and um, well, just doing without.

GameBreaker 2001 is essentially the same game as its highly flawed progenitor, *GameDay 2001*, and the two titles share most of the same problems. The same developer created both games — and both share an inordinate number of bugs, while neither can hold a candle to the graphics, gameplay, depth, or polish of *Madden 2001*.

Because it's a college football sim (and only because it's a college football sim), we like *GameBreaker* a little better than *GameDay* — meaning that it's only a marginally different kind of disaster. The addition of two lateral buttons on the shoulders of the Dual Shock pad makes the option play an amusing and useful tool for any offense. Also, the defense seems to be able to



actually cover some passes to running backs, which they simply never did in *GameDay*. We don't know if this is because the AI has been improved (unlikely) or simply because college plays feature far fewer short passes to the running backs (more likely). Also, the gratuitous use of commentator Keith Jackson, who lets the down-home colloquial phrases fly like Dan Rather on

election night, quickly gets repetitive, but it's funny for a brief moment.

And that sums up the only items of note. The graphics are sub-par; the AI is clunky; the play-calling screens are unwieldy; and the game is nowhere near as deep as *Madden*. Simply put, *GameBreaker 2001* is nearly as pathetic as the *GameDay* that spawned it. — Dan Egger

NextGen ★☆☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Football fans would best be served by waiting until next year.

■ Some of the effects are remarkably, um, effective



■ DREAMCAST

Max Steel

■ Publisher: Mattel Interactive ■ Developer: Treyarch

It has its quirks, but you'll still have fun

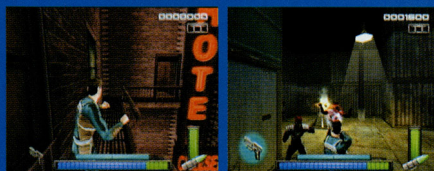
➔ The majority of the translations of cartoons into videogames are, for lack of a better word, crap. But Treyarch has pulled off the translation of *Max Steel* fairly well. You take control of Max, the adolescent boy who became a superhero through genetic alterations. His abilities include kicking and punching, as well as the "nano abilities" of Turbo and Stealth. Turbo gives Max a much stronger punch for a brief time, while Stealth makes him practically invisible to humans, security cameras, and the like.

This is played from a third-person perspective, and for the most part it works well. When you have to jump it can be confusing, since you have to be positioned just right, but with practice it quickly becomes second nature. Some of the animation is jerky — there are no transitions between forward and backward movement, for example — but for the most part, it's well done. The graphics, as a whole, are on par with a second-

generation Dreamcast game, and the special effects are downright pretty. Enemies are rather stupid most of the time with only the occasional sign of cognitive functionality, but bosses can be tricky, at least at first.

Throughout most of the game, you may ask yourself, "Haven't I played this before?" *Max Steel* is pretty much derivative of several different games, including *Tomb*

Raider, *Soul Reaver*, and *Shadowman*. It's got tons of action, some platform-like puzzles, as well as Doom-inspired puzzles — find key, pull lever, etc. However, for whatever reason, we enjoyed going through this one. In fact, we can't point to of any one thing terribly wrong with the game. Just don't expect a groundbreaking experience. — Kevin Rice



■ The action is decent and mostly enjoyable

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: While it's definitely fun and there's very little to complain about, it's all got a passé feel. It's fast-paced and it looks good, but it's nothing that hasn't been done before.

Chicken Run

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Developer: Blitz Games

The movie version of *Chicken Run* was an unexpected (if deserved) hit, but perhaps even more surprising is that the licensed game has actually turned out just fine. *Chicken Run*, the game, is one part strategy, one part puzzles, and five parts item collection, with a pinch of mini-games for flavor. In most levels you take control of the freedom-seeking chicken Ginger, but there are a few other playable poultry, including Rocky and, in one odd stage, the whole bunch of them all dressed up as Mrs. Tweedy.

Gameplay usually consists of Ginger wandering around Tweedy's farm collecting myriad items (tennis rackets, fireworks, sundresses, etc.) to use in her often far-fetched plans. In addition to all the collecting, there's a host of enjoyable mini-games, which yield special medals for a job particularly well done, and sometimes they open up still images from the movie.

In the main stages there's a little radar that locates important items and also shows dogs and Tweedy family members, complete with line-of-vision cones. It's an obvious riff on *Metal*



■ Think *Metal Gear Solid* with chickens — it's freaky, but it actually works

Gear Solid, but it works just as well — the radar turns red when your chicken is in danger of being caught, and only hiding or running away will save you. If caught, you usually lose the last item collected, and this can lead to a little tiring repetition, but that's not an overbearing problem.

For the most part, *Chicken Run* is enjoyable, even if it is a little short. Diligent players can finish it in a day or two, and most will complete it within a week, tops. However, it's a funky title that both grown-ups and not-so-grown-ups can appreciate, and outside of the platform game genre, that's a commendable feat. — Kevin Rice

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: This is a surprisingly good conversion of a movie into a game. It's graphically brilliant in its similarities to the movie, and the gameplay is smart.

Dave Mirra: Freestyle BMX

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: Acclaim ■ Developer: Z-Axis

It's virtually impossible to review *Dave Mirra* without using *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* as a point of reference, so let's get that out of the way first off. *Dave Mirra* is a stunt-based game much like *Tony Hawk*, in which players progress through several different parks and other locations, completing a series of objectives to move to the next level. The main difference here being that all the tricks are performed with BMX bikes instead of skateboards.

However, far from an unimaginative rip-off (ahem... listen up, Andy MacDonald), *Dave Mirra* is a fine game that stands well on its own. The graphics are fairly average — backgrounds border on bland, and the textures are nothing to write home about — but the bikers look good, and so do the ramps, and that's all we really care about anyway. The framerate chugs along nicely and we noticed no obvious glitches, which isn't to say the game is entirely quirky-



■ BMX action... not at its finest, but still pretty darn fine

free — just that they're well hidden.

Getting used to the control of the bikes takes a little practice, but once this has been mastered, *Dave Mirra* reveals a large variety of stunts and stunt combinations. The game is actually rather forgiving and lets you correct a flawed stunt by stalling on the ramp's lip or landing backwards. In fact, almost everyone will be able to find something to like about *Dave Mirra*, especially if they don't expect it to live entirely up to the mark set by the Hawk. — Garrett Kenyon

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: This is a bit of a surprise, and an extremely pleasant one.

Disney's Dinosaur

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Developer: Disney Interactive

A game based on a movie? Yeah, well you can at least breathe a sigh of relief that this isn't a side-scrolling platformer or a beat-'em-up. Instead, it's an action/adventure/puzzle game.

Gameplay revolves around maneuvering three of the characters from the movie (a Lemur, a Pterodon, and an Iguanodon), each with different abilities and weaknesses, through a variety of environments and situations. The gameplay is vaguely like the old *Lost Vikings* series in that you must trade off among each of the three characters and utilize their distinctive abilities to get through different areas. Unfortunately, pacing is an issue because many levels boil down to either just finding items and dropping them in the right spots (slow and boring), or completing a set of fairly difficult tasks within the limited time (better, but often frustrating).

Further exacerbating the situation is that the control is far from being spot-on. The most annoying thing is the use of an "auto-jump" instead of a jump button. Theoretically, when you



■ Not great-looking, and not great-playing either, but then that's a movie tie-in for you

reach a ledge, your character will leap off to whatever next ledge, outcropping, or sandbar is handy. In practice however, you'll lose a lot of lives when you step off a cliff and fall straight down, even when it looks like a jump should have been possible.

Finally, while the graphics engine is competent, it really doesn't showcase much of the Dreamcast's abilities either. So while *Dinosaur* valiantly tries to break the movie tie-in stereotype, it falls into the same traps as its predecessors: It's an average game hidden behind a big-name license. Oh well, maybe next time. — Blake Fischer

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Not as bad as most movie tie-ins, but still not a very compelling game.

King of Fighters: Evolution

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: Agetec ■ Developer: SNK

Evolutionary theorists are quick to point out that the process of evolution does not always involve onward and upward movement. Evolution, as done by SNK and its *King of Fighters*, proves that sometimes the trend is even backward.

King of Fighters: Evolution serves up a roster of 33 brawlers, some new, most old, for a 2D fighting game that's easy to beat. SNK provides its usual competence in the fistfuffs, with a wealth of strikes, blocks, throws, special attacks, and escapes. A "Strike" system has been added, and non-playable helper characters may be called in to assault an enemy or heal their partners. A power meter, when filled, enables fighters to access two separate modes (Armor and Counter), from which goodly portions of whip-ass may be dealt.

In this new millennium, the game, which saw release in 20th-century arcades, seems an *Australopithecus* bosei amid *Homo sapiens*. Its graphics are lackluster, and their creators have



■ In addition to being a 2D brawler in a 3D era, *King of Fighters* also suffers just not being any good

endowed all the characters with approximately four frames of animation. In the case of the female fighters such as the fan-wielding Mai, the animation accentuates jiggle factor over such trivial concerns as fluidity, and play suffers accordingly. SNK has also chosen to emphasize the backgrounds, many of which are so kinetic that they overwhelm the pedestrian foreground action. With nothing to offer that competes on any level, *Evolution* must face the cruel mistress of natural selection — it will be found wanting. — Greg Orlando

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: This *King of Fighters* should consider abdicating the throne.

■ DREAMCAST

Sonic Shuffle

■ Publisher: Sega ■ Developer: Sega

Shuffle bored?



■ Because at the end of the day, few things are more frightening than an echidna tangling with a cartoon mule — or something like that

→ There are board games and there are "bored" games, and *Sonic Shuffle* is seemingly both at once. Sega's first stab at a dedicated party game holds equal parts charm and tedium, but ultimately wins a grudging salute for its multiplayer action.

Sega's beloved hedgehog mascot and his assorted pals are tossed into a brave new world, one where their fates are determined by strategy and lady luck. Themed worlds are laid out board-game style, with three-dimensional paths and brightly colored spaces. Spaces hold various prizes and perils, as well as opportunities for glory or shame. As players navigate these paths, they'll need to plot out the best course and, as is the case with life itself, getting there holds much of the fun.

Although there is a single-player mode, it holds little appeal — too much waiting around for the computer-controlled characters to take their turn. No, *Shuffle* demands to be shared among friends. Mini-games form the meat of play, and the game offers up a plethora of simple contests wherein characters compete in free-for-alls, team up with a partner against another



■ No, it's not Candyland or Chutes and Ladders, honest

duo, or go solo against a unified triumvirate. *Shuffle* falters at times with its less well-designed contests. One inept challenge sees each character standing under a basketball hoop while a bomb rolls around the rim — call it video chicken, and call it boring. Special text-tree-based mini-events, quests, and card-based battles against monsters add depth to the play, and the vile Eggman (a.k.a. Dr. Robotnik) drops by on occasion to

darken everyone's door.

Cel-shaded graphics make everything appear as if straight out of a cartoon, and the overly bright colors add a manic feel to the proceedings. A cheery yet urgent soundtrack plays throughout, and both the art and sounds greatly complement the gameplay. In the end this shuffle is a decent one, and the hand that's dealt from it can hardly be considered a throwaway. — Greg Orlando

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: There's no *Sonic* boom. There is some snap and pop, though.

■ DREAMCAST

Project Justice

■ Publisher: Capcom ■ Developer: Capcom

When high schools attack!



■ It's more Japanese high school, kick-butt 3D action from Capcom — if that's your bag



→ Project Justice is what you might call a mixed bag. On one hand, it features elaborate team and air combos, a simple control interface (Capcom has adopted the four-button system from *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*), and plenty of moves. On the other hand, executing some of the more difficult combos will take practice because of the sloppy, sluggish controls.

Ever since its first 3D fighter, *SFEX*, Capcom has failed to successfully resolve the issue of controlling a fight in three dimensions. When jumping, characters float, and when

entering commands, moves occur after a split-second delay. This problem makes two-in-ones from the air and even some regular combos unnecessarily difficult. Capcom really needs to fix this habitual problem or develop a new type of 3D fighting game that actually takes the 3D medium into account instead of just recycling 2D engines and reproducing them in 3D.

But the main reason you'll likely either embrace or overlook Project Justice is its character design. Despite a few overly goofy ones such as the swimmer, the Japanese high school-inspired costumes here are a cut above the usual for that sort of thing, and they're even slightly refreshing. Nevertheless, their strangeness will undoubtedly turn some people off.

Overall, this is a decent fighter, but not for everyone. Fans of the series and fighting games in general may find interest in it, but for the rest, stick with *SF3* or *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*. — Chester Borber

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Unless you're hard-up for a new fighter, you may want to rent it before making a purchase.

NBA 2 Night

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: Konami/ESPN ■ Developer: Konami

When it comes to sports games on next-generation consoles, it seems to be a case of feast or famine, and sadly, Konami's *NBA 2 Night* is another undercooked piece of software.

The list of complaints here is as long as Shaquille O'Neal's wingspan, but the worst offender has to be the animation. Players appear to glide, rather than run, across the court. It's the dunking animation, however, that shows the most blatant lack of polish. Players have no problems slamming the ball home from behind the backboard, right through the glass, as if it weren't there! Often, a forward will begin a dunk animation 10 feet or more from the basket, only to magically teleport to the hoop to complete the miracle jam. The rest of the movements show the same lack-

adical approach. Players must stop in mid-run to catch a pass; jump shots look plain awkward; and every player performs the same lame-looking finger-roll during a lay-up.

The AI is severely lacking, too. A quick press of the turbo button seems to confuse the defense 90% of the time, leaving you a free path to the hoop. Even if someone does manage to block you, when you shoot with the turbo button depressed, your chances of making any shot, no matter how ludicrous, appear to quadruple or more.



■ The worst basketball title in years — avoid at all costs

There's plenty more, but you get the point. This dreary effort can't tie *NBA 2K1's* shoelaces. Don't waste your money. — Rob Smolko

NextGen ★☆☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Only recommended for those who demand to listen to a repetitious Stuart Scott supplying the color commentary. Boo-yah!

Star Wars Demolition

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: LucasArts ■ Developer: Luxoflux

This one had potential. Despite many fans' initial horror at the thought of a vehicular combat title set in the *Star Wars* universe, it's an undeniable fact that the combination of experienced car combat developer Luxoflux (*Vigilante 8*) with *Star Wars* vehicles is a wickedly appealing concept.

Unfortunately, the actual game sucks. The auto-targeting is horribly broken, and there is no repeat-fire, which means you have to squeeze each shot off manually. Also, for some reason nobody in the entire galaxy thought to invent a vehicle that can go in reverse. Thus, matches occasionally degrade into two enemies stuck facing one another, unable to move and simply unloading at point-blank range until one of them explodes.

The graphics and physics engine are similarly flawed. Draw-in is everywhere. The tractor beam is wildly inconsistent in its ability to hold onto things. Out of 13 vehicles, all but two (the rancor and the AT-ST), are hovercraft and handle like you're driving on ice. Enemy AI is poor, and the CPU opponents almost never kill one another.

There are bright spots. The weapons system, in which your armaments can be charged up to execute different types of attacks, is nice, and if the battlefields aren't



■ An auto-targeting nightmare: Note the AT-ST about to walk right over the hood, and we're aiming at some speck on the horizon

nearly as interactive and destructible as those in *V8:20*, there are compelling features, like Tatooine's Jawa Sandcrawler and Hoth's AT-ATs. Overall though, this one just doesn't come together. — Eric Bratcher

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: It's like *Episode One* itself: All the pieces are there, but they just don't amount to anything.

Surf Rocket Racer

■ Platform: Dreamcast ■ Publisher: Crave ■ Developer: CRI

It's a pity that the term "Jet Ski" is copyrighted, because it forces publishers to come up with some rather awkward titles for their games. Crave decided to go with *Surf Rocket Racer*, a rather bland description for an equally bland game.

As in most uninspired racing games, you begin by picking from the obligatory collection of spunky racers, then zip around improbable courses. Games like *Hydro Thunder* stave off boredom with fantastic graphics and clever shortcuts, but *Surf Rocket Racer* simply doesn't offer anything of note. The visuals are on the bottom side of ordinary and except for a trip over Niagara Falls, most of the maps are duller than dishwater.

There are a few ramps along the

way, and pulling off one of the game's "many" (i.e. three) stunts adds only two measly seconds to the clock and does little to goose the excitement. Skiing over the 13 different courses does provide a sense of speed, and the controls are responsive, but there's so little here that we "won" it in a day.

Perhaps sensing the lack of any real game, the developers don't enable you to save your progress between the four races in a championship. So if you win the first three races and lose the fourth, you have to



■ Surf Rocket Racer is no Wave Race — heck, it ain't even Jet Moto

race all four over again. It's an irritating way to extend the playtime of a game with only standard racing and a few routine stunt courses. — Jim Preston

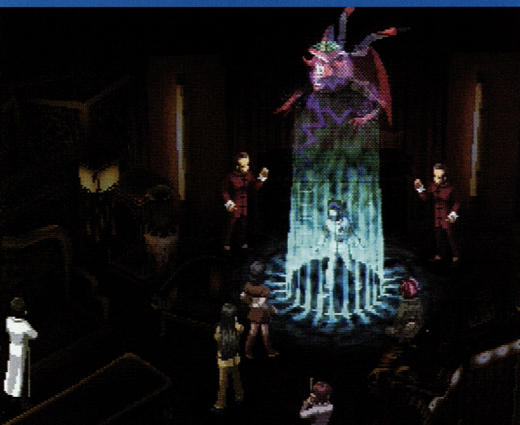
NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: This is a diet, caffeine-free, non-carbonated version of much more interesting games.

Persona 2: Eternal Punishment

■ Publisher: Atlus ■ Developer: Atlus

Take it personal



■ Don't let the less-than-stunning graphics throw you — this is one of the best RPGs you can find right now

➔ The original *Persona* earned a small cult following in the U.S., thanks to its more adult-oriented approach and a rather different gameplay style for an RPG. So we're happy to report this sequel continues those traditions.

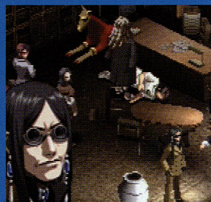
We concede that the graphics, made up of 2D, sprite-based characters over 3D backgrounds, aren't exactly state-of-the-art. While the sprites are large and the character designs excellent, the graphics are often more functional than they are breathtaking.

The gameplay, however, is outstanding. The world of *Persona* is a strange one, in which if enough people believe a rumor, reality is affected and the rumor becomes true. So throughout the game, reality is a bit shift. It's different and rather compelling.

Characters' abilities are determined by calling upon the titular "personas" — spirits and demons that cast spells. There are dozens upon dozens of them, and new, more powerful personas must be continuously summoned to deal with ever more powerful creatures. In fact, the combat system here is among the most flexible we've ever encountered. You can choose to fight or talk your way out, switch personas to

call up different spells at any time, or combine persona spells into extremely powerful "Fusion" attacks. If this also makes combat necessarily complex, it's nothing an experienced RPG fan should find daunting — plus, for once, the game enables you to actually shut off combat animations if you prefer your battles quick.

In fact, what really sets *Persona 2* apart (besides the constant, if amusing profanity that peppers the dialogue), is its high level of challenge. Boss battles are true tactical puzzlers, and there are numerous side quests and optional goals to keep you occupied as well. In the end, throughout its 60+ hours of play time, it's nearly impossible to put down. — Jeff Lundrigan



■ Another big plus here: You can save the game at any time!

ENextGen★★★★☆

Bottom Line: It ain't flashy, but this is as thought-provoking, deep, and engrossing an RPG as you'll find.

Blade

■ Platform: PlayStation ■ Publisher: Activision ■ Developer: Hammerhead

Blade, the movie, was something of a revelation, a first-rate pulp shoot-'em-up. Activision would have liked to recreate that frenzied pace in digital form, yet the result is anything but.

Despite an occasionally jittering framerate, this is on the visual high end of last-generation PlayStation titles. The various environments are detailed and attractive, dripping with grimly intricate texture maps and bloodthirsty villains. *Blade* himself is a dead ringer for his big-screen counterpart, right down to Wesley Snipes' unmistakably retro high-top fade. Even the animation is smooth and crisp, with our hero's various hyperkinetic kicks and twirls recreated in scintillatingly high style.

Gameplay, though, is pretty

standard action-adventure fare: gunning down opponents, collecting items, and hitting the occasional switch. Worse, much of this is rendered frustratingly difficult by a far-from-perfect control scheme. Simply put, *Blade* moves less like a kung-fu-wielding action hero than a dump truck in a sea of molasses. And so you spend much of the game being struck in the back by various heavily armed daemons, resulting in a quick and frustrating death almost every time.

It's sad when such an easily fixable



■ Although the graphics are fairly impressive, *Blade*'s gameplay just doesn't live up to the visuals

flaw brings down an otherwise promising title, but such is the case with *Blade*. — Samuel Bass

ENextGen★★★☆☆

Bottom Line: With the actual film available on DVD for half the price, why waste your time with this inferior spin-off?

Batman Beyond: The Return of the Joker

■ Platform: PlayStation ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Developer: Kemco

Ubi Soft has released *Batman Beyond* for PlayStation. In a related story, *Batman*'s creator Bob Kane will be exhumed from his grave and fitted for a newer, larger coffin that will allow him more space in which to properly roll over.

The mark of a bad game is that it fails on many levels. *Batman Beyond* fails on every level. It shoehorns the Dark Knight detective into an insipid side-scrolling adventure that marches the parade straight down Cliché Street. It's so generic that with minimal retooling, this game could have easily starred any hero from Wolverine to Speedy Gonzalez.

Gameplay consists of running

back and forth, beating up foes, collecting keys, punching open crates for power-ups, and trying to defeat a tired set of jumping puzzles. The bleary graphics are a perfect accompaniment to the game's jerky and magnificently terrible fighting engine. *Batman*, the ass-kicking machine, needs to change Batsuits to perform something as pedestrian as a jumping attack. Enemies often fail to recognize that *Batman* is standing two feet away, and every connected blow by anyone results in an ugly



■ Ever notice there hasn't been a good *Batman* game in years?

yellow explosion that obscures the game's inaction. This is, in fact, *Beyond* Putrid. — Greg Orlando

ENextGen★★★☆☆

Bottom Line: Jingle bells, *Batman* smells, Ubi laid an egg...

HBO Boxing

■ Platform: PlayStation ■ Publisher: Acclaim Sports ■ Developer: Osiris Software Design

Damn those expensive sports licenses! We know that games that don't pony up the dough to be authentic tend to fail with the game-buying public, but think how much better a lot of games could be if licensing fees didn't have to take a Jaws-sized bite out of the budget. Clearly, with *HBO Boxing*, the development team could have used those dollars a lot more than Roy Jones Jr. or George Foreman.

As it stands, *HBO Boxing* cuts way too many corners, making the gameplay nowhere near as compelling as the legendary roster of pugilists it boasts. Names like Hagler, Camacho, and Duran are just some of the 35 current and past names of the game (including two women). There's also an incredibly deep Career mode

that would have been great if the game were any fun to play.

One problem is there's not enough variety between the fighters. Every punch looks the same, regardless of who's delivering it. The controls are very clunky, too, especially when trying to move around the ring to avoid getting hammered, and they're also slow, making it hard to develop any sense of timing. Some will gripe that only one arm is active at a time (you need to hit a button to switch between hands), but this wouldn't be



■ It's better than Mike Tyson Boxing, but then again, that isn't saying much

so much of a problem if the controls were simply more responsive to begin with. — Rob Smolka

ENextGen★★★☆☆

Bottom Line: With a bit of control tweaking and a complete graphic overhaul, this may show some promise in the future incarnations. For now it's just an also-ran.

PLAYSTATION

The Mummy

Publisher: Electronic Arts Developer: Electronic Arts

It's a wrap



Not the greatest title we've ever seen, but *The Mummy* is still a better movie tie-in than most



When we started playing *The Mummy*, Konami's fully licensed subterranean action adventure, we put thumbs to the Dual Shock with more than a little trepidation. After all, *Tomb Raider* knock-offs tend to fare only slightly better than movie licensed titles, and this was both.

The game loosely follows the events of the film: As swashbuckling hero-for-hire Rick O'Connell, you must recover artifacts, solve simple puzzles, and fight off legions of mummies and swarty foreign devils. Gameplay is typical stuff, but it's nicely balanced to include lots of action, and rarely resorts to the frustratingly slow

passages that mark the genre.

For a change, action is frequent and visceral — it's not unusual to have hordes of mummies swarming from secret panels, to which the only solution is judicious use of Rick's twin revolvers. Control isn't perfect, but it's acceptable, and the traps are tricky without leading to pulling of hair or gritting of teeth.

The graphics are actually quite good for PlayStation. The textures and lighting of the various catacombs are evocative and convincing, and most of the supernatural characters are nicely rendered, although the human characters (including, oddly enough, the hero) don't fare so well. Much more impressive is the game's score (the same as the movie's) and voiceovers. They're not spot-on, but they're far better than the standard drivel.

In the end, *The Mummy* leans more towards the action rather than the adventure end of the spectrum, so if you're burned out on the Tomb Raliding Idiom, a bit of fast action could cure those blues nicely. — David Chen

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: Honestly, this game is a lot better than we could have expected — still not great, but not at all bad.

Ultimate Fighting Championship

Platform: PlayStation Publisher: Crave Developer: Opus

If *Ultimate Fighting Championship* had first appeared on PlayStation, we might have been more impressed with its originality and more likely to overlook some of its glaring flaws. After the excellent Dreamcast version, however, all we can see is how much worse this PlayStation outing is.

To avoid confusion we should point out that this is not a port of the Dreamcast game, but a separate title developed simultaneously by Opus. Both games are set up in similar fashion, with players having to win a single elimination tournament before taking on the Road to the Championship, and

both have a nearly useless "Create a Fighter" mode thrown in.

It goes without saying that the graphics suffer by comparison, but for PlayStation they're really not too bad. What really kills the game is the fighting engine itself. AI opponents are even harder to throw and work into locks than they were on Dreamcast, as this time there's only one button combo for throwing/choking and one for countering, making it incredibly easy



Being pinned down by a half-naked sweaty man is not just socially awkward — it's also painful

for the AI to predict what you're doing. In *Versus* play there's a bit more timing to it, but anyone can master it after a few minutes. After that you're left with a punch-and-kick fest that lacks style, grace, and fun.

— Daniel Erickson

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: Hardcore *Ultimate Fighting* fans should pick up a Dreamcast.

Power Spike Pro Volleyball

Platform: PlayStation Publisher: Infogrames Developer: Carapace Game Development

There's only one volleyball game available on the PlayStation — and apparently, it's one too many. That's the sad truth about *Power Spike*. It could have been enjoyable, but the graphics are ugly, the music repetitive, and it's a chore to play.

The practice round is practically useless. It's better to jump right into tournament play and suffer through a few losing games. Once familiar, the controls are decent, if a little simplistic. It's possible to aim each spike and serve, and holding down the action button during play will sacrifice accuracy for speed and strength, with an all-too-familiar strength bar to gauge it.

There's also a huge selection of pro beach volleyball celebrities to

choose as teammates, with player and model Gabrielle Reece as the prominently featured star. Just don't expect to recognize any of them — the players are jagged and badly animated, with indiscernible faces and slumped shoulders. It's almost embarrassing to watch as they drag their feet in the sand. The exotic beach locations suffer the same lack of definition, so the prospect of earning new outfits and new areas loses its appeal.

It's possible that with a little more time and planning, this could have been interesting, if not stellar. Right



The world will just have to keep waiting for a great volleyball title

now, however, it would probably be more fun to take the bus to the beach for the chance to play on a real court.

— Kathryn Renta

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: A strong shot right into the net.

Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robot Arena

Platform: PlayStation Publisher: Mattel Interactive Developer: Paradox

Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robot Arena, Mattel's first foray into 3D fighting, is a straight-up fighter "with a twist." You pick contestants, put them to combat, and hope they return with all of their limbs — that's the twist.

Barely based on the popular plastic playthings of yore (though featuring the original robots as curmudgeonly commentators), the game runs on the Thrill Kill engine and features 3D arena-based combat that's passable, if not enthralling. Each robot has the standard repertoire of special attacks, and combat continues even after one or more limbs have been lost, which is amusing for a while. Four buttons control attacking, with blocking and running controlled by the triggers, which ultimately makes maneuvering

unnecessarily complicated.

Gameplay is the standard affair — there's a Tournament mode, a Versus mode, and a Stakes mode, which lets you put your own pieces on the block. After winning a few fights, prize money can be put toward purchasing a colorful variety of new limbs, such as the Can-Opener and the Uranus Kickers, each of which features different strengths and weaknesses.

Graphics and sound are also standard stuff, and despite the innumerable combinations of interchangeable parts — not to mention the potential for airborne arms and



It's not quite enough to spoil your childhood memories of plastic, push-button pugilists, but it's close

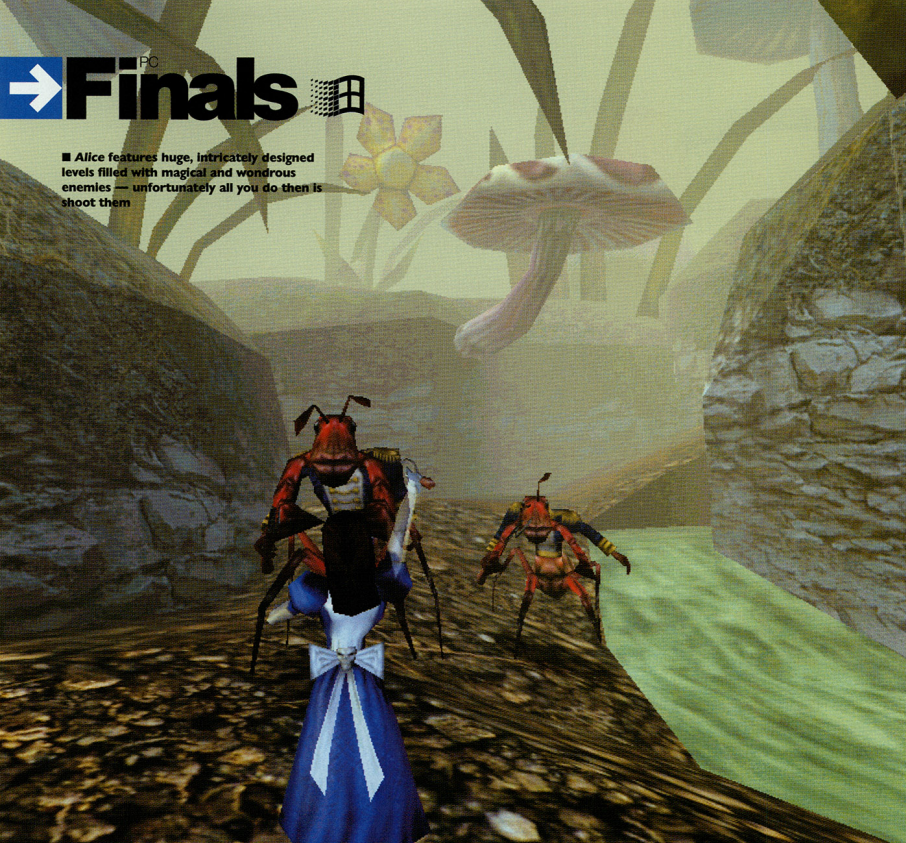
legs — the game's appeal is limited. Solidly average, *Rock 'Em Sock 'Em* does add some interesting wrinkles to the fighting genre, but the rest is as mechanical as the contestants themselves.

— David Chen

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: Neither dull as lead nor strong as steel.

■ Alice features huge, intricately designed levels filled with magical and wondrous enemies — unfortunately all you do then is shoot them



■ In *Alice*, even the most mundane jumping puzzles are visually intriguing



TIME BOMB

One of the most intriguing new weapons in the game is the Rabbit's watch, which can be used to stop time *Matrix*-style anywhere in a level (except against bosses). So when you get to a super-hard area, you can fight, or if you have enough charge on the watch, you can set it off and run as fast as you can while enemies hang motionless around you. The best part is that all damage done to frozen enemies affects them when the time runs out, so slice away.

■ PC

American McGee's Alice

■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ Developer: Rogue Studios

Alice has the look, but do we want to get to know her better?

→ *Alice* is a game with a unique vision behind it. As you may have suspected from the title, you play Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* fame, but this Alice is nearly full-grown, years after the original stories took place, and she's not doing so well. One night while she was sleeping, a fire broke out and destroyed her house, pushing the poor girl over the

brink and landing her a full-time spot in the local asylum. So with this as the launching point, you take control of Alice as she drops into a new, much more disturbing vision of Wonderland, a place where many familiar characters have gone crazy, killed the local populace, and gone about all sorts of nastiness.

As a game setting, this is one of the

best we've ever experienced. It's not just a cheap gimmick either. The ambiance permeates every facet of the game, such as superlative voice acting, incredible visual style, and some of the most intricate and playable level designs ever featured in a PC game. Even the weapons, an eclectic mix of children's toys gone bad (jacks, dolls, dice, croquet mallets, etc.) are unique, yet all useful.

Sadly, despite *Alice*'s extraordinary strengths, the gameplay fails to innovate, defaulting into the tried-and-true, third-person jump/shoot

formula. This creates a strange dichotomy between gameplay and visual design, almost as if they're two separate entities instead of a homogenous whole. The result is that as you play, you're not so much concerned for Alice's welfare as you are interested in seeing what lies just over the next hill.

Despite this, *Alice* is one of the few must-have PC games we've come across in the last year. It's not the ride of your life, but it does eminently deserve playing. And that's what counts, right?

— Blake Fischer



■ Some of the imagery may seem familiar, but now it's a lot more deadly

NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: *Alice* is an incredibly beautiful and well-designed shooter. If you're looking for more, you may pass, but otherwise it's a game you won't want to miss.



■ **Loads of style:** The John Woo staple is here with the patented guns-akimbo attack

■ With its brilliant concept but flawed execution, *Hitman* is a tough game to love

■ PC

Hitman: Codename 47

■ Publisher: Eidos ■ Developer: IO Interactive

A great, broken game

➔ *Hitman: Codename 47* could easily be the best game of the year — if it were fixed and released in 2002. It is undoubtedly a gorgeous and ambitious title, but it's so hampered by control, camera, and gameplay problems that it really makes us work to love it.

You take control of an anonymous hitman, whose mysterious barcode on the back of his skull suggests the nefarious use of science in his creation. There is a small,

undeveloped backstory that promises to reveal more about him, but right through to the game's unsatisfying ending, you're only given vague hints.

Indeed, the lack of many kinds of information is one of *Hitman*'s greatest flaws. Too often you're left stumbling through a level, unsure of exactly what you have to accomplish. You're then forced into an unsatisfying routine of trial-and-error, over and over, with no in-

game saves (only a couple of continues) and little help from a nearly useless map.

Yet for the patient (or perhaps simply forgiving), each one of those subsequent replays makes the hitman all the more lethal and efficient. By the time we took our tenth crack at one map in Rotterdam, we had so learned the nuances of each level that the hitman was sharp as piano wire, and the victory on that map was one of the coolest experiences we've had in a while.

Ultimately, that's the saving grace of *Hitman*: It's almost unsurpassed in atmosphere and style. The graphics



■ The quietest scenes are perhaps the most violent



■ The silenced MP5 is a ferocious weapon in the hands of a pro

look simply spectacular on a high-end PC, and the skeletal modeling system is probably the best in the industry at the moment. The levels are nicely varied even if there are only 13 of them, and the missions themselves are compelling. Sadly though, the missions are too linear to justify replaying them.

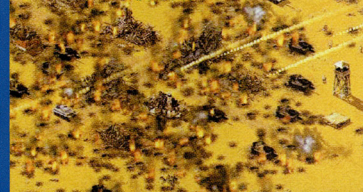
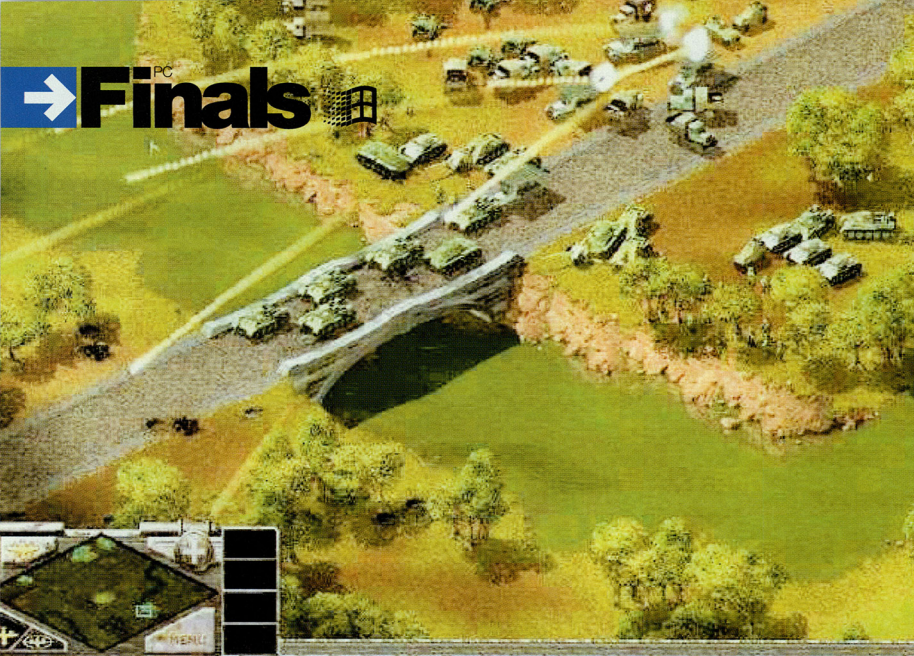
We have no doubt that an unfinished *Hitman* was rushed to stores to capitalize on the holiday spending, and given Eidos' current financial situation, we can't fully blame them. Yet we also can't help but wonder just how great this game could have been. — Jim Preston

BEHIND THE BAR(CODES)

Notice that barcode on the back of the hitman's shiny noggin? Those small black lines actually got their start in the railroad industry at the beginning of the 20th century. The bars were symbols printed on the side of railway cars used for a system that assigned certain cars to certain engines. The bars were so easy and efficient to use that soon the rest of the business world took note, and they now appear as the nearly ubiquitous UPC barcodes.

ENextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: A deeply flawed masterpiece that will, nonetheless, reward forgiving gamers.



■ That's the awful thing about deserts — no place to hide

MARKETING CONFUSION

CDV Software, the German-based power behind *Sudden Strike*, publishes under its own name worldwide, except for North America. But there appeared to be industry confusion during the holiday rush about who would act as publisher in this country.

For a while, some retailers (Chips & Bits and Amazon, for example) identified Eldos as publisher. They even produced box shots with the Eldos imprimatur. Wrong.

Other retailers (EBWorld.com and Express.com) proclaimed GT Software and Infogrames as the American publisher. More box shots and imprimaturs. Wrong again.

If you want to check the U.S. publisher, surf over to www.strategyfirst.com. CDV has assigned North American marketing rights to Strategy First and now gets European marketing rights to several Strategy First titles, including *Submarine Titans*, *Clans*, and *Disciples*.

No word yet on whether this means Strategy First will be looking at CDV's "erotic" titles, like *Wet Attack* or *House of Dirty Games*, however.

■ PC

Sudden Strike

■ Publisher: **Strategy First** ■ Developer: **CDV Software**

Make games, not war

→ You've got to hand it to those crafty Germans. Coming from practically nowhere, CDV offers up *Sudden Strike*, a WWII realtime strategy game that will rock you back on your heels with its blazing blitzkrieg action.

Think *Red Alert*, but without resource management, tank building, or mineral harvesting. This one is also much grander in scale. Some of the battles are massive, with each side fielding a few hundred troops at a time. Wait until you see your infantry

and tanks caught in a merciless rolling barrage. The eye candy is fearsome — fiery explosions, gutted villages, eruptions of dirt, smoking tank hulks, writhing men. It's such a charge to watch that it almost takes the pain out of being slaughtered.

And you can be pummeled in a variety of uniforms. You get single-player campaigns as Allied, German, and Russian armies with a dozen missions each, plus 34 additional stand-alone battles, for a total of 70 red-hot, shoot-'em-up encounters on two CDs. You even get multiplayer

maps for 12 players at a time, or for four teams.

The campaign missions are difficult, but balanced. You'll run the gamut, from a few French underground fighters prowling the night to take out anti-aircraft weapons, to huge armies staging in snow for an all-out assault. The detail is awesome, with everything a warrior could need: tanks, infantry, artillery, grenade launchers, katyushas, trucks, jeeps, mines, motorcycles, and ambulances, plus parachute drops and air support from bombers.

The fighting is bloody and ferocious from beginning to end. There are no easy victories here. Many seemingly impossible battles will have you shaking your head in frustration, but you'll love every minute. Guaranteed. — *John Lee*



■ This is the wrong war for summer soldiers



■ Take heart, here come our airborne reinforcements.



NextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: You VILL play! You VILL enchoy!

Call to Power II

■ Platform: **PC** ■ Publisher: **Activision** ■ Developer: **Activision**

In the beginning, there was a board game called *Civilization*, and it was good. And lo, one Sid Meier did take it upon himself to create from the void a turn-based, empire-building, eon-straddling, computer-strategy "god" game, and it was better, even unto the best computer strategy game ever... even if it is getting a little crazy.

So what can we say about a new game that is essentially fun, yet still seems a shade too familiar? *Call to Power II* is an excellent continuation of the *Civilization* tradition, covering 7000 years of history, from the Stone Age to the unwritten future. And it's a gripping, exciting game. But it's still a sequel to a sequel to a sequel.

Okay, so familiarity can be useful. If you've played the earlier games, you can jump into this one with a running start. Begin with a single settler, build your first village, and then spend the next seven millennia exploring, expanding, educating, and eliminating. You can even use city mayors to handle local micromanagement while you restrict yourself to matters of



■ **Call to Power II's graphics and animations are polished, although hardly state-of-the-art**

state and the duties of empire.

You can also construct your broad, future society in a variety of ways. Feel belligerent? Build up your armies. If peace is more appealing, dabble in diplomacy. Or just make your empire wealthy and drive competing nations to the poorhouse. Even better, climb the technological tree and confound the other poor suckers with your scientific breakthroughs.

It's a hoot, but it still feels like *Civilization*, and we've been there, done that, several times over. Luckily for Activision, some of us are eager to go there and do it again. — John Lee

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Yogi Berra said it best: "It's like déjà vu all over again."

Gunman Chronicles

■ Platform: **PC** ■ Publisher: **Sierra** ■ Developer: **ReWolf**

Playing *Gunman Chronicles* is like seeing your favorite rock band from high school playing nostalgia gigs on the Vegas strip. It faintly reminds you of former greatness, but somewhere the "get up and go" got up and went.

Visually, the *Half-Life* engine this runs on simply can't compete with the *Quake III*, *Unreal Tournament*, or LithTech engines. And those who argue that gameplays is more important to graphics should bear in mind that one of *Half-Life*'s greatest strengths was its ability to completely immerse the player in an utterly convincing world.

Gunman Chronicles, however, feels somehow staged and fake. Not only are the graphics blocky and bland, but the scripted sequences happen exactly where you expect they would, with the seams easily visible. The story is an unusual collection of odd set pieces, full of soldiers dressed in Confederate uniforms, as well as dinosaurs, robots, tanks, and sentient computers. Even the ending is strangely hollow when you aren't



■ **Gunman Chronicles isn't bad, but the Half-Life engine is starting to show its age**

even allowed to settle scores with the villain.

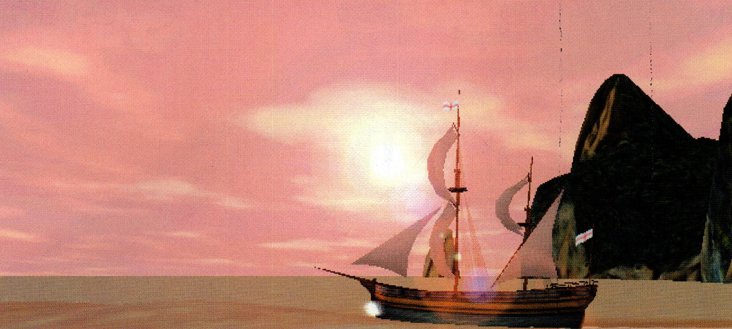
While *Gunman Chronicles* does have some interesting touches, such as the weapon modifications and devastating tanks, the production values and gameplay are too mediocre to save it. This was developed by a collection of amateur mod makers who never met each other during development, and they deserve credit for pursuing their passion. Hopefully, however, the next time we see them they'll be fronting their own gig instead of playing backup for Sierra.

— Jim Preston

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: A respectable mod that's still no better than some of the free stuff out there.

■ "All I ask is a tall ship and a star to sail her by..."



■ **PC**

Sea Dogs

■ Publisher: **Bethesda** ■ Developer: **Akella**

Arrr! She may not be the prettiest thing afloat, but she'll get us there...

→ Sid Meier's classic *Pirates!* and LucasArts' similar washbuckling series aside, the nascent buccaneer genre has been pretty much neglected by today's game designers.

Fortunately, Russian developers Akella have seen fit to correct this sad state of affairs with *Sea Dogs*, a free-roaming corsair adventure of the finest quality.

Thrust into the plectored loon pants of Captain Nicolas Sharp, privateer and plucky Brit, players are given the opportunity to loot and pillage in whichever manner they see fit — trading, raiding, and generally causing havoc on the high seas. Budding pirates are likely to find themselves almost immediately caught up in the game's immersive and ever-changing environment, carefully navigating the politically charged 17th-century waters while keeping a watchful eye on the plummeting price of wheat in St. Tropez.

Unfortunately, *Sea Dogs'*

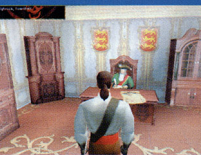
graphics engine fails to provide the crusty atmosphere that the designers have otherwise evoked so well. Detailed models, gorgeous seascapes, and a swelling soundtrack notwithstanding, this title often feels less like the Spanish Main than a procession of toy boats floating in a beautifully lit bathtub. The ocean appears devoid of life. Waves roll with nary a splash or plume, and your titular band of gnarled crewmen are reduced to

little more than numbers on a ships ledger. Combat is equally mixed, with the booming cannons and nail-bitingly desperate maneuvers of ship-to-ship conflict providing a far superior experience to the painfully dry boarding mode.

However, even with these failings, *Sea Dogs* is still a riveting experience, a seaborne *Privateer* packed full with all the rum, sodomy, and lashing you could possibly want. — Samuel Bass



■ **What's a pirate ship without a few cannons?**



■ **The graphics may be a little plain, but the gameplay isn't**

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Flawed design choices and lack of atmosphere aside, *Sea Dogs* inarguably remains one of the finest action-trading simulations since the halcyon days of *Elite*.



■ While the levels begin as realistic farm scenes, they quickly take a turn for the surreal

■ PC

Sheep

■ Publisher: Empire Interactive ■ Developer: Empire Interactive

The most fun you can have in a barn and still talk about it in public

→ Although a long time coming, Empire Interactive's *Sheep* is everything it was promised to be. It's an entirely new way to play a puzzle game and a brilliant example of developing artificial intelligence (or stupidity, as the case may be). It's also extremely strange. You play as one of four shepherds whose minds have been taken over by alien sheep, sheep that just happen to be the kin of the ones that inhabit Earth (who knew?). You then struggle to guide groups of these incredibly idiotic creatures through various locales, puzzles, and traps in order to round them up for a trip back to their home world.

Okay, forget the plot. It's useless anyway. What is important is the gameplay. There are four types of sheep, each with its own traits. Some are more easily panicked, some slightly smarter, etc. To get these

sheep to their various trucks and holding pens, you use techniques that for the most part don't involve actually touching the critters. While it is possible to pick up one sheep at a time — this is even necessary on some occasions — using that method it would be impossible to move a whole flock of sheep through a level within the time limit. So you have to herd.

Herdin involves moving directly towards the sheep and causing the timid animals to move off in the opposite direction. The complexity becomes clear when you realize that there's an entire flock to deal with and each will move off at a slightly different angle. Furthermore, the sheep are equally happy to move off into pits, grain threshers, jet intakes, and just



■ The stars over the jazz men's heads' mean you'll rack up extra points for mowing them down with your flock

about any other danger around. Puzzle fans will find their brains wonderfully wracked by some of the more complex setups that involve careful sneaking, odd distractions, and some unorthodox thinking in order to move a few incredibly dumb sheep a few hundred yards. — Daniel Erickson



■ All the cows in the game are shaped like milk cartons. Apparently that makes them easier to package for transport

ENextGen ★★★★★

Bottom Line: As brilliant and original as *Lemmings* was in its day

Stupid Invaders

■ Platform: PC ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Developer: Xilam

Adventure games are getting rarer, and good ones even more so. That may have been why *Stupid Invaders* was so eagerly anticipated — and why so many will be disappointed. At first this looks like a beautiful 3D game in the spirit of classic LucasArts and Sierra titles. The wacky characters and situations are here, as are the puzzles, inventory items, and even some of the humor. Then you start playing, and quickly realize this is a terribly designed, muddled mess.

Because what isn't to be found here is decent gameplay. This breaks all of the cardinal adventure game rules, and not in a good, revolutionary way. The camera will reverse angle with no warning, often in the middle of a room. Each large room is made of several zones, and if you're not in the right part of a room the mouse pointer won't indicate an item is usable — in other words you have to be right next to the fridge to even know it's interactive. Most of the things you can look at close-up do nothing at all; they just exist to show



■ *Stupid Invaders* is undoubtedly intended as some kind of revenge — we don't know by whom or for what, but that would explain it

off the pretty graphics. Furthermore, clicking on an item often takes several tries, resulting in the misconception that something isn't usable when in fact, it's necessary. Last, but clearly not least, you're constantly and repeatedly killed without warning or autosaves. Dare to open the wrong door and it's all the way back to the main menu.

Stupid Invaders just isn't any fun. Interacting with the environments is a chore and the puzzles are simply infuriating. Visually, however, this game is a masterpiece — we'll hang it on our wall. — Daniel Erickson

NextGen ★★☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Pretty but vapid, this would have been better as a non-interactive cartoon.

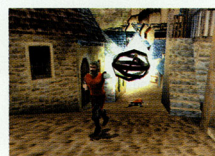
Timeline

■ Platform: PC ■ Publisher: Eidos

■ Developer: Timeline Computer Entertainment

Michael Crichton may spew best-selling novels and blockbuster films from his pen like a veritable pop-culture volcano, but if *Timeline* is anything to go by, he has some work to do before he can equal those successes in the videogame arena. Freely adapted from the novel of the same name, *Timeline* is truly one of the most lackluster releases to hit the PC in years, a pitiful combination of ugly visuals, dull gameplay, and less challenge than your average *Teletubbies* edutainment title.

In this post-*Quake III* era of curved surfaces and stratospheric polygon counts, there is absolutely no excuse for a game to look as dated and ugly as this. Bland environments, poorly designed characters, and an almost breathtaking absence of atmosphere conspire to push this title deep into mediocrity. Character animation is stilted and jerky, with an unfortunate tendency towards rapid bursts of spastic motion. The cut scenes would have looked bad five years ago, and



■ This is the worst action adventure game in recent memory — 'nuff said

It's sad to say, but the gameplay fares no better, varying between simplistic arcade challenges, obvious puzzles, and sub-par *Thief*-esque infiltration. Whether your humble time traveler is sliding down a hill, sneaking into a castle, or trying to steal the cloak of an absent noble, gameplay remains unchallenging, and it's possible to play through the whole of this utterly linear adventure in under four hours.

A disappointment no matter how you look at it, *Timeline* is one idea that Crichton should have simply left in paperback form. — Samuel Bass

NextGen ★☆☆☆☆

Bottom Line: Short, dull, and ugly, this wretched trip to the Renaissance Faire should have been left on the bookshelf where it belongs.

→ Letters

The Next Gen chain letter massacre

→ "Got Talent?" (NG 01/01) is one of the best videogame articles I've read in a very long time. The majority of such articles mostly follow the same line: "This system will have better games, this system is more powerful," and so on, almost without any believable sources. This is the first article I have read that rates all of the first- and second-party developers and seems to be a more reliable judge of where the good games will come from and which system(s) they will come out for than any other article I have read so far. You also admit that your

own rating system is flawed. True, but this rating system looks as if it is the only effective way of judging developers. I only have one request. Could you please do this with the top third-party developers?

Francis Victorino
Via email

Thank you sir. However, there is another opinion:

→ We don't complain about your game reviews — if **Next Gen** chooses not to like our games, that is fair enough. All we ask is a fair and objective

review. On the other hand, in an article entitled "Got Talent?" from the January issue, **Next Gen's** editors chose to stray from their expertise in game criticism and do a review of the talent of individuals and their studios. While it is unclear what credentials its writers and editors have to make such an analysis, what is clear is that they did not do any research to arrive at their conclusions.

Regarding our studio, Kodiak Interactive, they stated, "Kodiak has neither gifted programmers nor talented artists," and went on

to say that "...it lacks the expertise to make first-rate games." None of the writers of the article have ever been to Kodiak, nor have they ever called to talk with any of our staff or management about our experience, backgrounds, skills, or accomplishments. Furthermore, **Next Gen** has absolutely no knowledge of any of the next-generation work we are undertaking here, yet they have no hesitation to assume that the likes of Microsoft, Disney/Sony, and Hasbro have chosen to entrust multimillion-dollar franchises to a company that so lacks the qualifications to deliver. Given the fact that these writers have absolutely no basis on which to make any qualified assessment of us, their opinions represent sloppy and irresponsible journalism at best. This lack of effort is a disservice to your readership.

To set the record straight, Kodiak Interactive's "inexperienced" and "talent"-less team has played key roles in top-selling products for over 18 years. Just the team's top hits alone have sold well in excess of a billion dollars at retail and are too numerous to name herein. Kodiak's chairman, CEO, and president have a combined 42 years in the game industry as founders and executives of leading studios. Kodiak has the unique honor of being the only independent studio in development with a project scheduled for first-party distribution by both Sony and Microsoft. Perhaps they know something that the writers of **Next Gen** don't.

Jonathan Slager
Chief Executive Officer
Kodiak Interactive Software
Studios, Inc.

Tom Russo responds:
Dear Mr. Slager,

Although you probably do not remember, we had the pleasure of meeting some years ago when you were a marketing executive at the now-defunct Electrobrain. I'm not surprised that you're displeased with our assessment of your company, but I take great offense to your notion that we've been sloppy journalists. Had you read the introduction to the story in question, we stated clearly that we judged each developer by its complete gameography, and we acknowledged that this method isn't perfect. In fact, we cited Naughty Dog as an example of a company that wouldn't have scored very well if this feature had been written in 1995, before *Crash Bandicoot* was revealed.

You also certainly overlooked the parts on page 56, page 64, and page 70 where we singled out Rainbow Studios as the only independent studio that had a deal with both Microsoft and Sony, making your last claim completely invalid. For the record, when we received our list of all Sony first-party developers, from Sony, on Oct. 24, 2000, Kodiak Interactive was not listed. Perhaps you should have consulted with Sony before complaining to us — as of press time, they hadn't publicly announced any agreement with you. Nor was Microsoft allowing any of its developers to show or even discuss first-party Xbox games at the time.

Given general publisher paranoia and secrecy surrounding work in progress, we tried to be as fair as possible, which meant every developer in this feature was judged by its past work. Considering that our staff members have played your games, and that we play

CONTROVERSIAL KISSES

In NG 01/01, News Bytes says, "Fear Effect 2 even gives gamers their first-ever lesbian kiss in a game." Sorry, but *The Devil Inside* gets this award. Several cut scenes near the very end feature a female reporter getting close to our latex-clad heroine while she is restrained. Then the final cut scene has a very long girl-girl kissing segment, although one girl keeps morphing back and forth to a man, with some additional fondling as the camera spins around.

Just thought you might like to know.

Mark Smith
Via email

Fair enough. We could also point to a few others: In *The Sims* you can get two



■ There's a hint of same-sex affairs in *The Sims* for PC and *Xena* for PlayStation, but *Fear Effect 2* makes a point of letting you know

women (or two men, for that matter) to smooch, although it should be noted they require prompting and won't do so on their own. Also, back in '97 Black Dragon's A-O rated *Rianna Rouge* featured an FMV lesbian interlude with a lot more than kissing. However,

these are PC titles. *FE2* is on PlayStation, which is what makes it noteworthy — in the U.S. anyway. In Japan, of course, there have been dozens of games for various consoles over the years (notably PC Engine and 3DO) featuring all manner of soft- (and occasionally hard-) core content. The only domestic console title we can think of that even came close was EA's *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which, while not featuring a kiss, does in its final cut scene show a long, lingering hug between gal pals Xena and Gabrielle that's a bit more than "just friendly" (much like the TV show it's based on). Perhaps we should have said "the first lesbian kiss in a U.S. console game," but still, no other game has had its sapphic overtones featured as prominently in its marketing as Eidos' *FE2*.

CORRECTION

Last month's *Legend of Alon D'Ar Alpha* on page 42 mistakenly referred to Lead Programmer Mark Danks as Mark Dean. Also, the *Foigan Brothers Alpha* on page 28 referred to Lead Designer Andy Ashcraft as Andy Ashcroft. The editors at fault for these errors tried to argue that mischievous glaci-elves were responsible, but we know better. They've both been drawn and quartered using very slow, but very stubborn M.U.L.E.S.

the majority of games available every year, we feel perfectly justified in our assessment. Regardless of countless years' experience and products "too numerous to name herein," your teams have failed thus far to deliver any product of significant merit under the Kodiak name. For our sake and the sake of our readers, we'd be delighted to change our assessment of Kodiak after seeing your next releases. Until then, we ask you: What better way is there to evaluate an artist, playwright, music group, or game developer than to examine their collected works?

Brian Baker
Via email

→ In your recent review of my book *Trigger Happy*, your reviewer ends by sneering at me because I don't "know" that the city in *Crazy Taxi* is San Francisco; instead, I call it an "imaginary" city. In fact, according to Sega of Japan, the city in *Crazy Taxi* is a fictional city whose attributes are loosely modeled on a number of different American cities, including but not limited to San Francisco. (The beach areas, for example, are meant to be reminiscent of Miami.) I am correct, then, to write that it is an "imaginary" city, because no such city exists in the real world. Perhaps your reviewer was thinking of *Metropolis Street Racer* instead? I would be grateful if you would print a correction to this mistake.

Steven Poole
Author, *Trigger Happy*
Via email

Actually, if you want to get technical, all cities in videogames are imaginary — it's somewhat silly to suggest there's a brick-by-brick translation of a real-world city to be found in any console game. Your point, however, is taken.

→ You make a great magazine, and many of the most interesting articles

are on videogame history. Thanks to you I learned that *SpaceWar!* is really the first videogame. However, when I checked my *The Far Side Millennium Off The Wall Calendar 2000*, on the date of Dec. 8, 2000, the historical note said that in 1958, "Willy Higinbotham creates the first videogame. Built from an old oscilloscope, it's like a tennis game watched from the side." Is there some reason you never mentioned this? I am very curious because it would make the dawn of videogames a decade before you previously stated.

Editor-at-Large Chris Charla replies: Higinbotham did create a game on an oscilloscope for an open house at the government lab where he worked. It wasn't like Pong though — you basically watched a dot bounce over a line and then tried to catch it with a *Breakout*-style paddle, which would bounce it back. However, this was more of a tech demo than a real game; it didn't keep score, nor did it have a defined start and end point. Still, it definitely deserves a place in the prehistory of games (it was also allegedly pretty fun to goof around with).

There were other simple games created and run on computers before *SpaceWar!* too. One of Alan Turing's first programs was a simple chess game. He actually played chess using the program (running it in his head) before he got it running on a computer, and he was said to be very frustrated because it played chess so much worse than he did. Also, Nolan Bushnell did some very simple early games (tic-tac-toe-type things) on a video monitor that may even predate *SpaceWar!* But *SpaceWar!* seems to be the first full-fledged game that you would

JURASSIC ERROR

On page 59 of **NG 01/01** you credit Hit Maker with the creation of the Genesis game *Jurassic Park*. This is incorrect. I had the pleasure of being part of the development team of *Jurassic Park*, which was made at Blue Sky Software in San Diego. Please make a correction so the original makers of this fine title can rest in peace.

Joe Shoopack
Via email

Indeed, the Genesis version was developed by Blue Sky. Next Gen apologizes for the error, Joe. The editor in question has been smeared with deer blood and left hanging up to his waist in the raptor pit.



■ The "classic" Genesis title *Jurassic Park* was developed by Blue Sky, not Hit Maker — remember this, there will be a quiz

be able to look at today and say, "Yup, that's a videogame." It required a processor and a monitor to be played (unlike chess or tic-tac-toe); it had a start and end point; and it was a two-player game. In short, the prior work on games probably wouldn't have been enough to deny Steve Russell a patent if he had applied for one, so we'll continue to mark *SpaceWar!* as the first videogame — with an important nod to Higinbotham, of course.

→ I can't express enough how much I love your magazine — keep up the excellent work. Recently at my school, the principal heard that *Pokemon*, when translated into English, is "Satan's Demons." He went on a rampage tearing up cards, stuffed animals, and bookbags. Please tell me if this is just another rumor. Thanks a lot.

"Artist267"
Via email

Um, tell your principal he's been grossly misinformed (also perhaps suggest a he

take a Valium or three). "Pokemon" translates as "pocket monsters" — they're monsters, and because the game originated on Game Boy, they could be carried in your pocket, so.... It's not even really the Japanese language, but a phonetic spelling (in Japanese characters) of the actual English term — a common practice in Japan both for importing Western words and phrases and for occasionally inventing a proper name for a product, company, or what have you. Honestly, Satan has nothing to do with it.

Now, *Onimusha*, on the other hand...

→ I am a big fan of Bungie, loved the *Marathon* series, and played *Myth II* non-stop, but I'm a little confused about *Halo*. I'm really looking forward to it, but everywhere I look sources

give completely different release dates and platforms. When you first previewed it a long time ago, you said that it would be for PC and PS2. However, in a recent issue you mentioned that Microsoft would be getting it too (for Xbox). I would like to know exactly what platforms it's coming out for, and when its release dates are. Thanks and keep up the good work.

Wayne Johnson
Via email

Welcome to our world, Wayne. Bungie has been effectively dodging a firm release date for *Halo* ever since the game was announced two years ago. As we write this, the release date for the PC version is "sometime in early summer 2001," according to a Microsoft spokesperson. An Xbox version is, of course, in the works, and it's probably due out when the console is released late this year. Or maybe not. Frankly, your guess is as good as ours.



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Note: email is vastly, vastly preferred

Retroview

March 1993

The next generation is seeded, and controversy grows

➔ In early 1993, the 16-bit generation, led by Genesis and SNES, was beginning to show its age. Trip Hawkins' 3DO console, which would focus heavily on educational software and multimedia as well as games, had been announced late in 1992, and it was all the rage.



■ Nintendo's 1993 SNES shooter *Starfox* was the first game ever to ship a million units

Upon the unit's October release, however, a hefty \$700 price tag and a poor selection of launch software were sufficient to convince consumers to stay away in droves.

In the meantime, though, a legion of future competitors surfaced. Atari finally unveiled the Jaguar in mid-August, by which time details of Sega's upcoming Saturn console had begun to leak. Nintendo's engineers were also hard at work — in September, the company announced it was teaming with Silicon Graphics to create a 64-bit gaming machine initially dubbed Project Reality and eventually renamed Nintendo 64. There were

smaller players as well — Commodore, NEC, and Sony all announced 32-bit, CD-ROM-based machines in various stages of development.

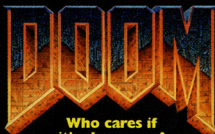
While the seeds of the 32-bit generation were clearly sown (and overplanted), the 16-bit generation found itself under scrutiny in late summer, when *Mortal Kombat*'s gory battles focused the attention of politicians and parents who voiced concern about potentially offensive games. A content-based ratings system would eventually be adopted.

Starfox: The Super Nintendo shooter you must play

NextGen

Next Generation Magazine

PREPARE TO MEET YOUR



id's amazing first-person shooter may just be the best game ever

40+ Games Reviewed!

PC:
• *Homeworld*
• *The Beverly Hills Cop*
SNES:
• *Robotnik's Revenge*
• *MechWarrior*
• *Zombies ate my neighbors*
Genesis:
• *Tenacious 93*
• *Madden '93*
Sega CD:
• *Dracula Unleashed*

SPECIAL REPORT: The Next Wave

What we've uncovered about six new consoles from Sega, Nintendo, and more

SEGA ■ PC ■ ATARI ■ NINTENDO ■ TURBOGRAFX ■ 3DO ■ AMIGA ■ ARCADE

What we were playing

They may have been ratings-shy, but there was no shortage of gameplay

■ NBA JAM



■ System: many (SNES shown)
■ Publisher: Midway

■ SHINING FORCE



■ System: Genesis
■ Publisher: Sega

■ MORTAL KOMBAT



■ System: many (Genesis shown)
■ Publisher: Midway

■ SONIC SPINBALL



■ System: Genesis
■ Publisher: Sega

■ SFII TURBO: HYPER FIGHTING



■ System: SNES
■ Publisher: Capcom

Top 10

Films of 1993

Jurassic Park	\$357,067,947
Mrs. Doubtfire	219,195,243
The Fugitive	183,875,760
The Firm	158,348,367
Sleepless in Seattle	126,680,884
Indecent Proposal	106,614,059
In the Line of Fire	102,314,823
The Pelican Brief	100,766,056
Schindler's List	96,065,768
Cliffhanger	84,049,211



...and in the real world



■ Following the death of his father and the Chicago Bulls' record-breaking third consecutive NBA championship, Michael Jordan retires from basketball, shifting his focus to minor league baseball. He would rejoin the Bulls a season and a half later and lead them through a second three-peat.

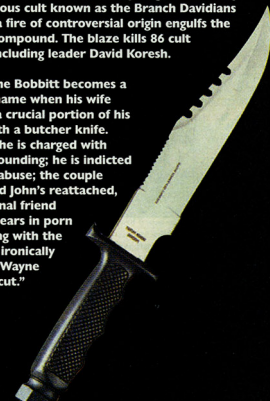
■ NBC's Emmy-harvesting machine *Cheers* announces last call after eleven seasons. The final episode of the long-running series ends with Sam Malone telling a prospective customer, "We're closed."

■ Nelson Mandela is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; actor River Phoenix becomes the victim of a fatal drug overdose; and the 5-billionth can of Spam is sold.

■ A team of Russian archaeologists investigating a 2,500-year-old tomb amid the frozen mountains of Siberia uncover the mummified bodies of six horses and one woman, whose elaborate tattoos and well-preserved clothing would trigger ripples of excitement throughout the archaeological community.

■ Law enforcement officials' 51-day siege of a heavily armed religious cult known as the Branch Davidians ends when a fire of controversial origin engulfs the Davidians' compound. The blaze kills 86 cult members, including leader David Koresh.

■ John Wayne Bobbitt becomes a household name when his wife amputates a crucial portion of his anatomy with a butcher knife. Eventually, she is charged with malicious wounding; he is indicted for spousal abuse; the couple divorces; and John's reattached, fully functional friend actually appears in porn films, starting with the best-selling, ironically titled "John Wayne Bobbitt: Uncut."



NEXT GENERATION

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So it was finally time to say goodbye to the illustrious Mike Wilmoth, who left us for Xbox and is already greatly missed even though he only moved down the hall. In his place, we welcome Eric Smith, who likes the cardboard fort that Tom and Blake built for him so much that he refuses to take it down — probably needs it for warmth — it's frigid! freezing in here.

probably needs it for warmth... it's a migrant, freezing in here.

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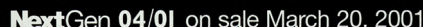
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Hundreds of you will undoubtedly ignore our review and buy this mind-bendingly beautiful game anyway. Go ahead, but be aware that doing so will grant us full rights to say “we told you so” when you realize it’s awful. – Page 78. If there were one game that looked like it was made specifically for our new Art Director Eric Smith, it would be knitting-related. But if there were two, the second would be the game at the bottom of this page. – Page 49. **For every gamer who ever thought the only thing missing from Metal Gear Solid was a few talking chickens. – Page 84.** Tom’s favorite phrase finally makes it into the magazine. Don’t like it? Hey, welcome to our world. – Page 100. **Editors, assemble! It’s clobberin’ time! Jeff smash! – Page 34.** Unfortunately, space considerations forced us to remove the mandatory “We hate Jar Jar” reference that has become a necessary part of our every mention of LucasArts. Rest assured we still hate him. – Page 86. **First, they dropped the kickoff. Now, they’ve fumbled the first snap. – Page 81.** This mysterious character has the same color scheme as the A-Team’s van. We don’t think it’s a coincidence. – Page 48. **Bill Gates and The Rock on the same stage. Did Hell freeze over, or are they just the strangest pair ever to present an American Music Award? –**

Page 8. The best game on this page (the only non-licensed property) really has “personality.” Straight truth or bad pun? You decide. – **Page 87. The Thrill Kill engine resurfaces.** – **Page 88.** Meet Tidus, an “underwater Blitzball player!” And Yuna, the High Summoner’s daughter. They’re the only ones who can save the planet. By the way, Square’s back. – **Page 30. The best PC RTS you’ve never heard of. Could be.** – **Page 92.** We’d love to quote Tim the Enchanter and say this rabbit’s got a vicious streak a mile wide, but we’re not entirely sure it’s a rabbit. – **Page 52. Sure, it’s a wimpy body model, but with a mug shot this ugly, we’d still run away.** – **Page 11.** Let’s see... half our shots are from Comiskey Park, and the other half are from Wrigley Field. We’re betting someone on the design team is a Chicago fan. – **Page 38. Confederate soldiers, dinosaurs, and robots. Is it any wonder that this game’s plot is a bit unfocused?** – **Page 93.** And this issue’s “Game Character Most in Need of a Can of Raid” award goes to... – **Page 90. We’re not saying this is the best game ever. We’re just saying it looks like it’s going to be the best game ever.** – **Page 54.** If there’s one genre that has no danger whatsoever of being underrepresented on PlayStation 2, this is it. We can’t promise they’ll be any good, but there’re plenty of ‘em. – **Page 80. This looks like the gameplay everyone expected The Bouncer to have. Think it’ll ever make it to a console?** – **Page 32.** Quick! Name a good PC game (just one, please) that could have been fantastic if it had been given more development time. For a hint, look here. – **Page 91. It appears that this game will not contain one single explosion. For some reason, we’re strangely drawn to it anyway.** – **Page 50.** The non-Blake members of the Next Generation editorial staff would like to take this opportunity to collectively disavow any endorsement of the references in this article’s closing sentence. We can’t stop him. We can only hope to contain him. – **Page 29. If this game’s designers think about bizarre creatures like this during every waking moment, what do you think their nightmares are like?** – **Page 46.** Psst! Hey kid, wanna start your own game company? – **Page 64.**

■ The open-source Indrema console has the potential to give game developers all the freedom they could ever want. Next month we give you the inside story



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